



This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

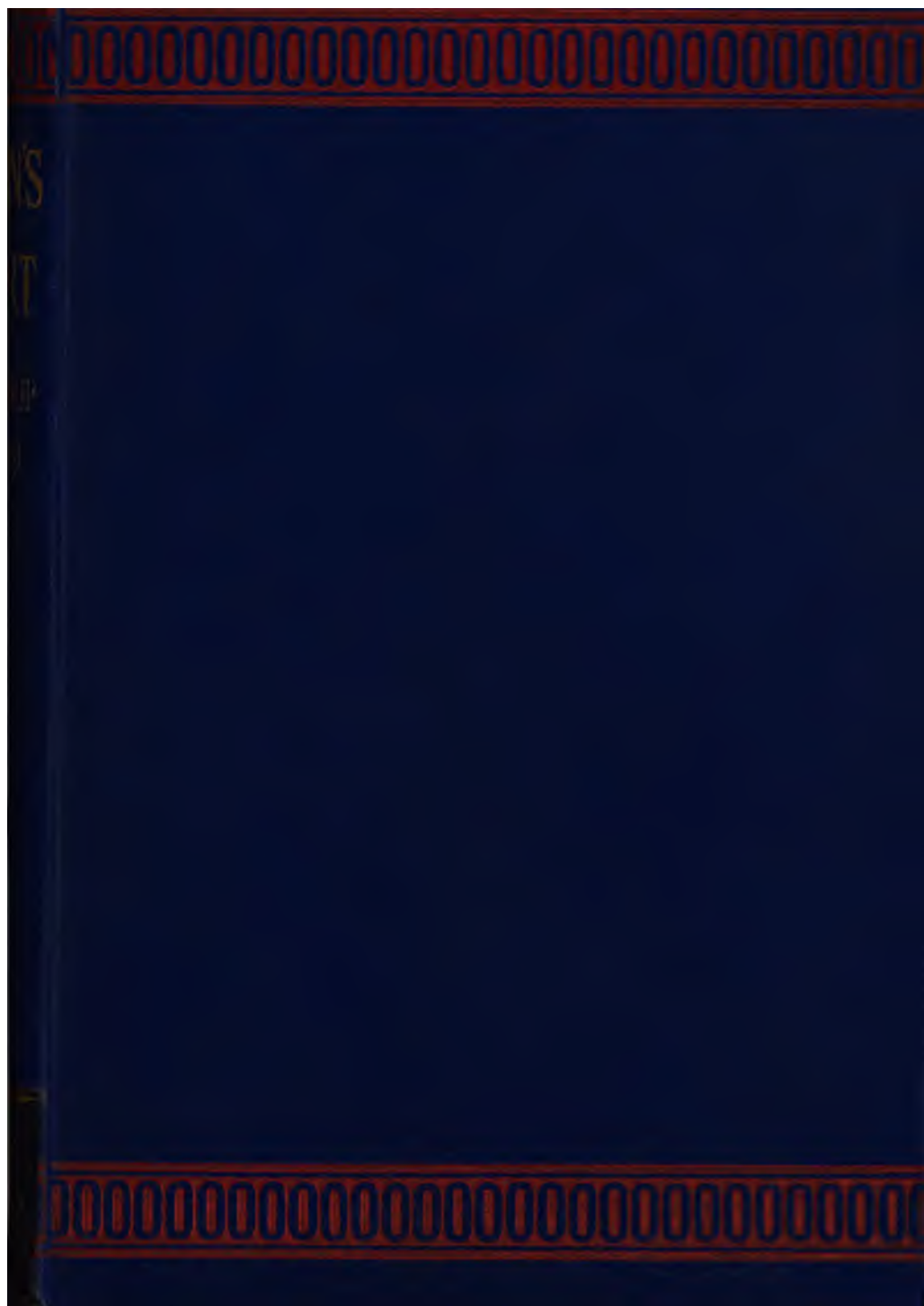
Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

- + *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.
- + *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.
- + *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.
- + *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at <http://books.google.com/>





600064768.



600064768.

FASHION'S GAY MART



FASHION'S GAY MART

BY

ANNIE THOMAS

(MRS. PENDER CUDLIP)

AUTHOR OF

"DENIS DONNE," "STRAY SHEEP," "COUNTY PEOPLE," "LONDON SEASON"
ETC. ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. I.



LONDON

TINSLEY BROTHERS, 8, CATHERINE STREET, STRAND

1880

251. f. 602.

CONTENTS
OF
THE FIRST VOLUME.

UNEXPLAINED.

	PAGE
CHAP. I. THE LOOKING-GLASS ROOM.	1
„ II. “IS IT JOY, OR IS IT PAIN?”.	22
„ III. THE GOBLET IS SHIVERED	42
„ IV. A FATAL STEP.	67
„ V. THE WEDDING-DAY	90
„ VI. DOUBTS AND HOPES	110
„ VII. CLARE “EMBROIDERS”	117
„ VIII. WHAT DID IT MEAN?	136
„ IX. A FIRST MEETING—AND A LAST.	147

HER ANTECEDENTS.

CHAP. I. SHE CAME	184
„ II. HOW TO SECURE POSITION	208
„ III. MRS. WESLEY’S STORY	237



FASHION'S GAY MART.

UNEXPLAINED.

CHAPTER I.

THE LOOKING-GLASS ROOM.

I HAD been staying at Glayton Hall, in a pretty, secluded village on the south coast, with my aunt, Mrs. Westerton, for about a fortnight, when I first met the St. Johns.

Many times in the course of that fortnight I had heard of them from my aunt and her visitors, and my curiosity was keenly excited on their account. But something had invariably happened to prevent

the introduction to them which my aunt had promised me, and I began to fear that my Christmas holiday would come to an end without my seeing the people who were unanimously declared to be the "most interesting family in the place."

Would to Heaven that fear had been realised !

My aunt was the lady of the manor, and besides the Hall, which she herself occupied, three or four of the best houses in the village were hers. One of these, the prettiest cottage residence it has ever been my lot to see, had been let for twelve months to the St. Johns, who had furnished it with a disregard for expense, which proved them to be wealthy people.

About a week before Christmas-day, my aunt asked me to give up skating and walk with her to "The Keg," the St. Johns' cottage.

"I have made up my mind to ask them

to dine here Christmas-day, and the invitation being such a short one it will seem more gracious if given verbally than if written. It will be dull for three lone women like Mrs. St. John and her daughters to spend the day by themselves, and you and your friends will be grateful to me for giving you a sight of Clare St. John. London men as you are, such beauty as hers will astonish you, I think," the old lady said to me as we walked through the grounds, and along a private road to "The Keg."

The Keg was really a wonderful little place, even before the St. Johns had come to it. A pretty little ten-roomed toy-house, with a porch and a verandah. French windows on one side of the house, and simple lattice casements on the other. The porch and sides of the house were wreathed in roses all the summer; but in these bitter winter days of which I am writing the ivy

held undisputed possession, and the only thing which relieved the glossy green leaves was the porch door and the window-frames, which were painted red.

We rang, and were instantly admitted by an elderly female servant in dove-coloured merino and a plain close-fitting muslin cap. The whole aspect of the woman was in harmony with the soft, quaker colour, and I gained from her appearance on the threshold an impression of its being a peaceful and well-ordered household.

The entrance-hall, a small, octagon-shaped place, from which several other rooms opened, was snugly and warmly carpeted, curtained, and cushioned ; and, in addition, a glowing wood fire was burning on the hearth. Opposite to the fire a huge black-framed round mirror hung, in whose depths the fire was reflected at what appeared to be several miles' distance. The air was fragrant with the perfume from some subtly-prepared rose

and violet leaves, with which three or four monstrous Oriental vases were filled, and a large black cat stretched at length on the hearthrug completed the air of comfort of the hall.

But in another moment we were in a little drawing-room, compared with which the hall was a barren spot. This room was hung with fluted silk of the colour now known as old gold, velvet curtains of the same tint shaded the French windows, and the ebony chairs and sofas were upholstered with rare needlework, in which old gold was the prevailing tint. The floor was covered with Persian rugs, and a few good specimens of Sèvres, Dresden, and Oriental china were displayed in cabinets and on shelves. Over the mantelpiece a fine copy of one of Guido's Madonnas was hung, and graceful baskets, filled with rare flowers and ferns, filled up a variety of spare nooks and corners.

There was no particular style affected or

period adhered to in this room. It was comfortable, pretty, luxurious. Queen Anne might have sat in it, so might Queen Victoria, and neither would have looked one bit out of place. As for the ladies who were sitting in it, they were so perfectly in harmony with their surroundings that I hailed them queens of my fate, if not of my soul, from the first moment of my looking upon them.

Clare St. John was the first living object upon whom my eyes fell in this room, and Clare St. John claims the first place in the *dramatis personæ*. She was a full-figured, rich-faced brunette, full of the glory of life, and mentally equal to every opportunity of enjoying it. I turned to her with self-evident enjoyment when the names were announced, and in the absence of her mother she made us welcome.

In the absence of her mother! This absence grew to be a much-commented-upon

fact, for it was the afternoon which Mrs. St. John had announced by cards should be sacrificed to her friends. Clare reigned in a superb fashion that made me long to have such a queen regnant over my social life. She was so sweet and pretty, so graceful and gracious, and, above all, she was so beautiful, with her brown hair and eyes, and the carmine pink in her cheeks. A flesh-and-blood young woman—essentially that. Full of health, strength, and vigour, yet not in the least coarse or dairymaidish. A girl who dared to be free, because in the manner of her freedom there was no boldness—no effrontery. Her perfect, easy self-possession was as far removed from either of these things as it was from awkwardness or shyness. “A perfect woman nobly planned,” I thought Clare St. John that day, and in spite of all that has come and gone since that day I still think she was that.

Her sister neither contrasted strongly nor

harmonised well with her. The younger Miss St. John—Alice her name was—was nothing more than the average good-looking, moderately well-formed, exceedingly well-dressed young lady. “A nice, elegant-looking girl,” some of the Glayton judges called her, but they being of the gentler sex, I attributed their lenient verdict on her charms to the fact that she was not likely to distract the eye from their own.

After speaking of the weather, and looking at and admiring the flowers, Mrs. Westerton, finding that there was no sign of the hostess, explained her mission, and gave her invitation to the daughters, who cordially accepted it on behalf of their mother and themselves.

“Mamma will come down about five. Can’t you wait and see her?” Clare said, when my aunt at last rose to go; but the latter, feeling that our visit had already extended to an altogether unconscionable

length, made her excuses, and we took our leave.

As soon as we were out of the house Mrs. Westerton who, as lady of the manor, looked upon herself as sovereign of the place, said, rather loftily—

“I’m afraid Mrs. St. John is a little inclined to give herself airs. This is the third or fourth time I have been on their ‘day,’ and each time I am told that ‘Mamma will come down about five.’ I really think when I go at five mamma might make an effort to get herself out of her room a little sooner.”

“You evidently go too early,” I said, feeling it beyond me altogether to blame ever so slightly the mother of such a glorious girl as Clare St. John.

“*You* evidently are smitten with Clare already, Eric,” the old lady said, in pleased accents, that told me I should meet with no opposition from her if I proffered my suit to

the girl whose beauty had already dazzled and delighted my eyes and heart beyond expression. Then we went on to plan amusements for the Christmas week, and my aunt made a suggestion that caused me to palpitate with pleasure.

“Why shouldn’t I ask the St. Johns to spend the whole of Christmas week with us?” she said. “It will do my heart good to have a happy, merry group of young people about me once more, and you young men will be all the happier and merrier for the companionship of such girls as Clare and Alice St. John.”

I believe I gave three cheers for the prospect, and the next day I went to The Keg alone, as the bearer of my aunt’s extended invitation.

On this occasion I saw Mrs. St. John and found her to be just what the mother of Clare ought to have been in appearance—a tall, handsome woman, with a quiet, dignified

manner, a sonorous but sweet voice. I felt quite filial towards her even on this our first meeting, and pictured her before the altar-rails, giving her lovely daughter away to me.

I gave Mrs. Westerton's invitation, and used all my powers of persuasion in the endeavour to get her to accept it, but she was firm on the point of refusing it for herself. She "should be glad for the girls to go and have a happy week," she said, "but as for herself, she should be happy to dine with us at eight on Christmas-day. She could not break a long-established rule by sleeping a night out of her own house."

"Mamma's like a cat in that respect," Clare laughed. "Do you know, Mr. Spencer, that she is as deeply devoted to a *room* as most people are to some particular person. Isn't it true, mamma?"

Very coldly, but very clearly, Mrs. St. John declared that "such was the case," and

feeling unaccountably chilled, I was not ready with any answer to a statement that I had fancied had been made in jest, until I saw the painful earnestness with which she listened and replied to it.

For a moment or two I thought, too, that Clara seemed sorry and embarrassed; but she threw off her confusion, and became her bright, unconstrained self again when her mother added—

“Perhaps Mr. Spencer would like to see the room which I find such”—(she hesitated for a moment, and then added, hurriedly)—“pleasure in occupying for some hours every day?”

“Oh! yes, we’ll pilot him there,” Alice said.

And the two girls led the way through the hall and up a staircase which was veiled by heavy curtains.

The room to which they led me was over the dining-room, and partly over the hall.

A long, low room in reality, its proportions completely bewildered me, and I felt nearly blinded by the glare and amazement, for the room, ceiling and all, was hung and lined with looking-glasses in the narrowest conceivable frames.

“Wouldn’t anyone suppose that mamma was a very vain woman, judging from the fact that she surrounds herself with looking-glass in this way?” Alice asked. And her sister added, quickly—

“But you mustn’t suppose so for an instant, Mr. Spencer; there never lived a less vain woman than our mother. This is just a whim of hers, and we think nothing of it, for ever since we can remember, ‘Mamma’s looking-glass room’ has been a household word with us.”

“Then it’s not so much the room as the looking-glasses that Mrs. St. John is attached to? You’ve only been here a short time, have you?” I asked.

“Yes, it is the belongings of the room that she is faithful to,” Clara said, thoughtfully.

And then I tore my eyes away from the sea of glass, and looked at some of the other furniture of this most fascinating and uncanny looking apartment.

There were two or three couches, a few chairs, a large, round table, and a high, magnificently-carved cabinet, with massive doors. All the wood was of the blackest oak ; all the textile material, the coverings of the couches and chairs, and the curtains, were of the most intensely black and lustrous satin. There were neither books, signs of work, writing materials, flowers, nor music, in this glittering but gloomy place. The whole effect was the reverse of exhilarating, and I could with difficulty repress a shudder when Clara said—

“Now you’ve been introduced to mother’s dear room—the room in which she spends

two hours regularly every day from three to five."

"What does she do?" I exclaimed involuntarily.

And the two girls looked at each other and laughed, as Clara answered—

"That we don't know—that she has never told us ; though, as children, we used to pester her with questions ; we used to think she slept, didn't we, Alice ? But she doesn't look as if she had been resting when she comes out, does she, Alice ?"

"I should come and unravel the mystery," I was beginning to say, when I was checked by the appearance of Mrs. St. John gliding in through the looking-glass door.

"Have you young people seen enough of my sanctum ?" she said, in her grave, sweet voice, and I hastened to assure her that I had seen quite enough of it, and to get myself out of the weird-looking room without delay.

However, he was my own familiar friend, and it was impossible that I could put him off, though my soul was sick with the fear that he would win the sweet heart of the only girl whom I had ever wished to marry. So, as he was inevitable, I made the most of the previous days that intervened before he came, and by Christmas-eve I had the satisfaction of feeling that Clara knew my secret, and was not indifferent to it.

They were to come to us in the afternoon, and my dear old aunt made me supremely happy by proposing that I should drive over and fetch them in the dog-cart which was kept at the Hall for my use.

“The girls are sure to prefer being driven by a dashing young man in a dog-cart to being fetched in the brougham. The cart will go for their boxes, and mind you get home in good time for them to make themselves beautiful for dinner, for, of course, it is your heart’s delight to

make a favourable impression on your friend, Mr. Paulton, of whom I've heard so much.

The old lady's eyes twinkled merrily as she said this, and I affected to join in her laugh against myself; but, in reality, I felt in dire trepidation at the near approach of my handsome colleague, and I went off resolving to put my fate to the touch that afternoon before he arrived.

Luck was with me, it seemed, when I reached The Keg, for Clare was alone. Alice had gone down to the village to see some young friends, and intended walking on to the Hall a little later, and "Mamma's in her room," Clare explained.

"If you'll go and say good-by to her we'll start then," I said, for I longed to get her out into the wide, open country in the dog-cart, behind my fast-trotting mare, Jezebel. I was madly impatient to tell her my tale of love, and to claim her for my own before Paulton came.

“I have said good-by to mamma. I shouldn’t dare to go to her; you know we never do when she’s in the room,” she said; and then her lovely face flushed rosily with the divine light of dawning love as she added—

“Ought I to go with you alone? What will your aunt think, Mr. Spencer?”

“That I’m the happiest fellow in the world,” I muttered, hurrying her away as fast as I could in the fear that Alice might come back unexpectedly and spoil my plans. She gave a few directions about their luggage, and then sprang into the dog-cart, and in a few minutes we were dashing along the high-road at Jezebel’s best pace.

“Poor Alice! what pleasure she has missed by walking off,” she said, presently; and I felt that she was not regretting Alice’s absence one bit, and took courage from the conviction to say—

“Before we get home I hope I may have

reason to bless Alice for having walked off and left you alone."

"Don't you like Alice? Don't you think she's a dear girl?" she murmured, and I told her that I thought Alice was a very dear girl—such a dear girl, in fact, that I should like her for my sister. And she tried to look unconscious, while her face burned with happy blushes.

Only for a short time did I toy with my fate. It was too serious a matter with me for to trifle long. I won her promise to be my wife before we had left The Keg a mile behind us, for my words were few, and rushed straight from my heart. And when she had given me her answer—her quick, clear, decisive answer—I felt that nothing could sever her from me, and that Paulton would never be my successful rival.

My darling, how I loved you! How I gloried in my prize! How I longed to proclaim my triumph to her mother, to my

aunt, to my friends, to the whole world! I adored her, and she was a girl to give back a man's full love with a glorious generosity that I still believe to be peerless.

We only drove a little way after that. I wanted to get home to The Keg and ask for her mother's consent; but she shook her head rather sadly, and said—

“No, no; not to-night, Eric. You can't see mamma until after five, and by that time I ought to be at the Hall. Be satisfied with the knowledge you have—that *I* give myself to you. Wait till to-morrow for mamma's consent.”

“Why can't I see Mrs. St. John till after five?” I asked; and Clare said—

“Don't you remember? If I were *dying* I wouldn't dare to have my mother disturbed between three and five in *that* room.”



CHAPTER II.

"IS IT JOY, OR IS IT PAIN?"

I MADE haste to seek my aunt the minute after I entered the house, in order to confide the great and joyful news to her, and to get the seal of her approbation before the arrival of Paulton and the other men.

"Have you spoken to Mrs. St. John?" Mrs. Westerton asked, directly I had told my story; and I was obliged to confess that I had not done so.

"My dear Eric, she ought to have been told before me. It is her right to know that you want her to give her daughter to you before anyone else hears and speculates about it," the dear old lady said, with that

stately air of setting my duty plainly before me which she could assume at times.

"It was my impulse to go to her at once—I assure you that it was, aunt—but Clare wouldn't let me."

"Clare not let you! Clare wish to keep such a thing secret from her mother! My dear boy, you surprise me. I can hardly believe it to be possible. It was plainly your duty and hers to go straight to Mrs. St. John with your story before you let a whisper of it reach other ears."

"But, my dear aunt, it happened that this momentous question was settled between Clare and myself during those mystical hours when it is Mrs. St. John's rule to seclude herself in that room, and the habit of the family to respect her seclusion."

"On such an occasion she would have broken her rubbishing rule," my aunt said, decidedly. "Eric, I don't like it at all. I

don't mean for a moment that I don't like the idea of your marrying Clare, for she is all that I could desire in a wife for you. But I don't like the way in which the affair has been conducted. It's a sort of hole-and-corner way of getting a wife. A well-born and well-bred man asks a little more formally than you seem to have done for the hand of the woman he seeks for his wife and the mother of his children. You might have shown more respect to *me*, I think—you who are my heir, and who will take my name by-and-by."

The dear lady was, undoubtedly, very much annoyed at the simple way in which I had conducted my wooing and won my bride. But I was too happy to be much cast down by her displeasure, and though she laughed to scorn the reason I gave for not having sought Mrs. St. John at once, she finally forgave me, and "let it pass" as an error of youthful judgment.

Paulton and the other men reached the Hall just in time to make a hurried toilet and join us at the eight o'clock dinner, and as they were introduced to the Miss St. Johns I saw at once that Clare's beauty and general charm of form and manner made a vivid impression on a man whose "only looks were woman's looks" avowedly.

She was dressed in a regal-looking robe of some semi-transparent texture that looked like idealised golden silk, and in the deep ruff which encircled her throat she wore a bunch of gold-coloured chrysanthemums.

Anything fairer, prettier, and statelier than this lady of my love it was impossible to conceive, and I was impatient for the moment to come when I could confide my good fortune to my friends.

My aunt had decreed that Clare was to sit on her right hand, opposite to Paulton, while my place, of course, was at the farther

end of the table. It was one of those huge, long family tables which will not contract, and the distance between Clare and myself forbade anything like conversation between us. But I was in a measure reconciled to this by the cordial, frank way in which Alice, who sat by me, whispered her satisfaction in the prospect of having me for a brother.

"Clare told me at once, because we have no secrets from each other. When we were both children we came to the conclusion that one secret was quite enough to have in the house," Alice said, brightly.

And I was tempted to say—

"Do you think your mother will like me well enough to confide her secret to me, if she accept me for her son?"

The girl's face grew serious in a moment.

"No—not for one moment do I think that she will. Some people have suggested that it is a form of madness; but mamma

is as sane, as calm, as reasonable, and as *good* as a woman can be."

"Perhaps it is a sort of 'retreat'?" I suggested. "She retires to that room for prayer and meditation. I have a cousin—a High Churchwoman—who once or twice a year goes into retreat, under spiritual direction."

Alice St. John shook her head dubiously.

"I said mamma was very 'good,' but she is not what some people would call a religious woman. She does not believe in outward forms and ceremonies. She never goes to Church——"

She checked herself abruptly, for I suppose she saw by my face that I was more than rather shocked. A free-thinking woman is to me a moral deformity.

Before I could say anything Alice added—

"You must not think—you needn't fear, in fact, that mamma has ever tried to in-

fluence us. My father was a very staunch Churchman, and she has never said one word against Church rites and privileges to either of us. But she listens almost sternly to our descriptions of services and remarks about sermons, and always stays much longer in that room of hers alone after we have spoken on the subject. So as we don't win her sympathy, we abstain from the topic."

"Alice, I feel that we shall fathom the mystery of your mother's devotion to that room yet!" I said.

And the girl shuddered a little as she replied—

"You'll never try to force mamma's confidence, will you? You'll never worry her with questions about it? She *hardens* so when people are curious and pester her about it, and as it's her only weakness, we ought to respect it, I think."

I had been so much engrossed by this.

conversation with Alice that I had been disregarding what was going on down at the other end of the table for some time. Now my attention was called by Paulton.

"Spencer, have you had any skating yet? We have had a good deal of it at Lillie Bridge, and on the Long Water. Have you any good ice about here?"

"You young people ought to go out and skate by moonlight on the lake," my aunt put in. "Years ago, when my dear husband was alive, we always during a hard frost invited all our friends, at least, once in the season, to a skating party by moonlight on the Glayton lake."

"Renew the old times next winter, my dear aunt," I cried, and Clare kindled into greater beauty as she said—

"Mr. Paulton has been promising to skate a waltz with me, Mr. Spencer."

I observed that she hesitated on the brink of calling me "Eric," and felt hurt for a

moment that she should have done so. Then I remembered that our engagement was still unauthorised by her mother, and knew that she was right.

"We shall have a heavy snowfall to-night," Paulton chimed in. "We must start sledging to-morrow—have you a sledge?"

"There is not a sledge in the place. We must be contented to skate if it's dry, and to stay in the house if it snows," Clara said, and I caught a glance from Paulton's eyes that must have told her as plainly as it did me that he at least would be well contented to do anything that kept him in her presence. It was a relief to me this evening when the ladies left us, and I was free to take my aunt's place near Paulton. With him, at least, for the sake of us all, I was determined there should be no concealment.

"It wouldn't be fair on my part to ask

you what you think of Miss St. John until I tell you that I am engaged to her," I began, and Paulton's face positively beamed with kindly sympathy as he replied—

"Well done, old fellow; I thought how it was from your manner and hers, do you know. Charming girl she seems; any tin?"

"Not that I know of," I answered in sober embarrassment. "The fact is, you see, the money is no object to me. My good old aunt has taken care of that; I have always made up my mind to go in more for birth and beauty than for money, and you must admit I've got what I wanted."

I asked the question rather eagerly, for Paulton's decision was final in our set in town where a woman's beauty was concerned. Rather to my surprise, his reply evidently did not come from his heart.

"Yes, she's a very pretty girl; neat figure, and charming expression, and all that, old fellow, and you've done very well.

I like the look of the sister, too," he added, constrainedly.

"Do you? She's not generally considered——"

"No, no. I know what you're going to say. She's not so regularly pretty as your choice: but what do you do here at night—billiards, or whist, or music?"

"We have had no music up to the present time, because neither my aunt nor I play, but the St. Johns sing deliciously I'm told—especially Alice."

"Are they only recent visitors?"

"Came to-day, about two hours before you."

"By Jove! and in those two hours you have brought matters to a climax," he said, admiringly. Then he asked, "Have they a father, have they a mother, have they a sister, or have they a brother?"

"Only a mother—a delightful woman. You'll see her dining here to-morrow," and

then I went on to tell him a little about The Keg and the looking-glass room.

He was rather interested, and a little amused, but his interest was divided between listening to me and wanting to get away to the ladies. At last, noticing how absent and impatient he was, I told him he might "go and have a talk with Alice," and I remained behind with my other friends who had not had quite enough Burgundy yet.

When eventually I did get into the drawing-room with the other men, I found my aunt asleep in a chair, that stood screened from every draught, by the side of the fire, Alice singing an old ballad about "Greensleeves," and Clara and Paulton looking out at the unsullied sheet of snow, that was spread over the lawn and laurels, from the boudoir window.

My artist's eye was gratified by the picture they made, seated side by side in the wide old window-seat. The light from

a rose-shaded glass lamp fell upon them, and I thought I had never seen any handsomer living creatures. Clara's head rested against the side of the window-place, and her eyes were bent downwards. He was leaning forward, with his gaze fixed on her face with so unmistakably an enamoured expression that my heart felt dull and heavy as I realised it.

"We are watching the snow," she said, nervously, as I approached, and I took my stand by her side and her hand in mine.

"Is it falling from your hands, dear, for you seemed to me to be watching the destruction you were working on this poor flower?" I said, and at my words and gesture Paulton gave me an open and undisguised look of surprise and annoyance.

"Let us go and hear Alice sing now," she said, rising hurriedly, and we all three went back to the drawing-room.

Presently Alice began begging her sister

to sing, and then, after a little delay, for the first time I heard the rich, full contralto of my gloriously-endowed love, and as her voice pealed through the room I turned to Paulton and muttered—

"I've never heard her sing till now. Am I not a lucky fellow?" and a light seemed to dawn upon him as he replied, quickly—

"That is not the one you're engaged to, is it? Say no, old boy, for——"

"Yes, it is. You haven't been making any mistake, have you?" I interrupted, and he placed his hand on my shoulder and gave me a hearty grip that spoke volumes to me.

For the rest of that evening he kept away from Clare, and I saw her sweet eyes following him with a sort of pleading pride in them that convinced me she marked the change and wondered at it. Perhaps she was a little wounded by it, for Paulton is a man whom all women like; and, further, he was my friend, and so, "of course," as

I told myself, "an object of special interest to Clare." But though he kept apart from her, and though she did not try to lure him to her side that night, it was revealed to me that I might grow madly jealous of my handsome friend and beautiful betrothed.

Neither Paulton nor I made any further allusion to the mistake about the sister to whom I was engaged. He would not go into the smoking-room with the rest of us that night, pleading "unusual fatigue" as an excuse for absenting himself; but I fancied that it was heart fatigue from which he was suffering, and it did occur to me that it was rather strange that he should have been so completely subjugated at a first meeting by a girl who must reasonably be supposed to be extremely preoccupied.

"Clare's mind must be filled with anxiety about the result of my interview with her mother to-morrow," I thought, and then I went on to perplex myself with the question

as to how, with her mind full of this anxiety she could have thrown such a glamour over Paulton in so brief a period of time?

But the next morning, when he met me in his cheeriest manner, these doubts faded away, and by-and-by, when Clare came down, and he gave her a greeting that was as cordial as it was unconstrained, I knew that I had nothing more to fear from him. The homage he rendered her was rendered to my future wife, and, as far as he was concerned, I would have trusted him to take her all round the universe alone.

But that she was not entirely satisfied about something was soon made obvious to me, for as I loitered behind the others on our way across the park to church that morning, she said to me—

“Don’t you think, Eric, that we are making ourselves a little conspicuous by separating ourselves from the rest in this way?”

"I don't think that it's a very out-of-the-way or remarkable proceeding ; my aunt and your sister and Paulton know that we've agreed to take each other for better and worse, and I don't think that one of them feels an atom of surprise at our wanting to be together."

"But my mother doesn't know it yet, and the Glayton people will have an opportunity of indulging in silly gossip if we go late into church in the wake of all the others, like any other country John and Jill."

"Never mind the Glayton people. Tell me, Clare, will it suit you to live here? My aunt wants to resign the reins to me altogether when I marry."

"Eric, do remember that not one word does my mother know of this yet, and I was going to ask you not to tell her to-day. Let her have a perfectly unruffled day with us all, without being upset and

agitated, and told that she must make up her mind to part with one of her daughters."

"You have changed since last night," I said, sorrowfully, and she promptly assured me that she had done nothing of the kind, but that "she dreaded telling her mother of any projected break in their quiet home life."

"It's in the order of things that children marry and leave their parents, darling."

"Yes ; but ours is a peculiar case. My mother has no relations and no friends, saving the few she has made here. She has devoted herself to us exclusively ever since we were tiny children. You must remember that my father died when Alice was a baby, and my mother was a beautiful woman then, and might have married again. She has only us to love and to love her in return, Eric. You must be very gentle, very considerate indeed, in your treatment of my mother."

"I will love her like a son, and honour her in a way that will satisfy you and make her love me in return," I said, heroically, for to tell the truth Mrs. St. John had not inspired my breast with any very loving sentiments about her up to the present time, and I was beginning to cordially dislike that room and her conduct respecting it.

"Then show consideration for her to-day," Clare said, imploringly. "Christmas-day always seems a painful day to her. I was more than astonished when she agreed to come and dine with Mrs. Westerton."

"It must be as you wish, I suppose," I said, with a sigh, and she rewarded me for my obedience with a bright smile. But inwardly I was annoyed at being compelled to defer my explanation to Clare's mother, and more annoyed still to find that it was Clare herself who was putting obstacles in my way. Altogether, though each moment I was with her increased my passionate

admiration for the most charming girl who had ever gladdened my eyes, I felt a steadily increasing antipathy to and distrust of her mother. A woman who shrank from all religious observances, disliked Christmas-day, and shut herself up for hours alone in one of the most alarming "arrangements in black and white" that the most diseased imagination could conceive and carry out was not at all my ideal mother-in-law. But, then, Clare was quite the ideal woman to adore, and I adored her.



CHAPTER III.

THE GOBLET IS SHIVERED.

THERE was a great to do at the Hall on Christmas-day, for my aunt had an idea of making it a great social *festa* for her servants as well as for her guests ; consequently, an army of “helps,” under the management of our most excellent cook, was imported into the house for the occasion, and the regular servants sat down to a sumptuous dinner at two o’clock, after which little service was required of them—fortunately !

It had been the rule of the house ever since my uncle died that my aunt and I should walk in solemn procession into the servants’ hall, drink their healths, and

listen to the toasts in which they drank ours. This old-established rule was adhered to as usual to-day, and my face burnt as the old butler uttered a fervent hope that "next year they might see a wife stand by Mr. Eric's side."

"I think we may tell the servants; they will be so delighted," my aunt whispered, and I implored her to keep silence in a way that made her doubt my integrity and feel generally distrustful of me. For this distrust from my dearest and kindest relative and friend I had to thank my future mother-in-law; and the reflection that this was the case made me look forward with aught but pleasure to the prospect of having her for my nearest neighbour at our ordinarily happy dinner table that night.

I forgot my uncertainties, or rather ceased to worry over them, and restored myself to good humour that afternoon by helping the girls and Paulton to make holly and

mistletoe wreaths and bouquets for the decoration of the rooms.

Clare's taste in these things was perfect. Flowers and berries in her hands seemed to assume lovelier colours and fairer forms. She decreed that there should be nothing high on the dinner-table this day, and trained trails of ivy and sprigs of holly about the white table-cloth in a way that made me forswear tall glass vases for ever.

But the most exquisite of all her achievements in the way of floral decorations this day was a large cross made entirely of tiny ivy leaves and berries of the fair parasite queen, the mistletoe herself.

The idea of making this did not emanate from Clare though, for it was not until after my aunt had said that "of all the floral designs, the one she liked best was the symbol of faith," that Clare made the cross and carried it into the drawing-room, where

she stood it alone in its beauty in a retired niche.

When we had made the house fragrant and brilliant with blossoms and berries we all walked down to the lake, and found to our delight that the ice was thick enough to bear with safety.

Paulton and I did a little skating that afternoon, and it was agreed that on the following morning we should take the St. Johns on if the frost still held, and induct them into the mysteries of the graceful art.

Daylight was drawing to a close before we left the lake, and though we walked back briskly through the park, it was quite dark before we reached the house. However, when we entered, the whole place was radiant and aglow with leaping fires and multitudes of wax candles.

Mrs. St. John had arrived, we were told; and as soon as they heard this her

daughters ran up to her room, and by-and-by they came down together, as attractive-looking a trio as the heart of a man about to be closely connected with them could desire.

“ Hoping that you will alter your determination and stay with us here instead of going home this bitter night, I have had a room arranged for you,” my aunt said, cordially, to her guest; and after a little time, and a great deal of persuasion, the guest agreed to stay that night, provided she might be permitted to return to her own home before luncheon the following day.

“ We’ll settle that question after dinner,” my aunt said, rising, as dinner was announced. “ Eric, give your arm to Mrs. St. John, and lead the way.”

To my annoyance, when we were seated at the table, I saw that Clare was seated next to Paulton, and I also saw that

Paulton did not respond in the slightest degree to her many and animated efforts to draw him into conversation.

Oddly enough, this repulsion or reserve—which was it?—on his part annoyed and rather offended me. Though I had jealously feared and dreaded anything like sympathetic intercourse between this girl for whom my heart was sick, and my old friend the young Apollo of our clique, it was galling to me to see that he could resist and turn the cold shoulder on her when she made her charming self more than ordinarily charming to him.

According to my idea it was his place to sue, and hers to repel; and I did not like to see them reversing what I considered the proper position of things. In fact, my mood was ill-conditioned and unreasonable, as it is the wont of men to be when they feel that they have but a feeble hold on something which they highly prize.

Nor did my handsome, high-bred neighbour at the table do a single thing to soothe or assuage the jealous demon within me.

During the early stages of the dinner she was silent and almost sulky, it seemed to me. We were talking about some of the Glayton Christmas bounties and doles, and my aunt gave all the glory, where glory was due, to the good God who had so endowed her as to enable her to help her poor fellow-creatures.

With humble, thankful heartiness, she blessed Him for putting it in her power to keep gaunt want and poverty, cold and hunger, far from her cottage doors, and resolutely through all the conversation that ensued on the subject Mrs. St. John held her tongue, and betrayed not the faintest interest in anything around her.

But after a time I saw her glancing now and again at Clare and Paulton, and at last she said—

"Your friend is a Government *employé*, I believe?"

"Yes; the War Office," I replied; and then I added, rather grudgingly, "Paulton's a favourite with everyone, nature and fortune included—he is what you see to look at, he's clever and popular, and he's the heir to a baronetcy and a very fair property."

She nodded her head approvingly.

"He is all these things, is he? I am glad to hear that, for I see that he is something else, too,"

"What is that?" I asked, eagerly.

"Superior to your popular superstitions, which, under the name of religious observances, mix themselves up with everyday life at certain periods. He was the only one of you who did not rhapsodise and utter ridiculous sentiments upon the heaven-ordained peace and goodwill which you all erroneously seem to think ought to reign just now."

"Paulton's not a bit sceptical, if you mean that," I was beginning, when she put her hand up and checked me with a gesture.

"I won't discuss that with you; indeed, why should I be interested in hearing whether he is or not? But I am interested in his future title and property, for I see that he is attracted (almost against his will) by my daughter."

"By Clare!" I ejaculated, and she answered, correctingly—

"By Miss St. John! And a man must rid himself of a number of worn-out prejudices and delusions before he can marry my daughter."

Flesh and blood could not stand this any longer. At any risk I felt that I must make Mrs. St. John acquainted with the real state of the case, before she maddened me completely by smoothing away in theory all obstacles to Clare's marriage with Paulton. I could not make sure of a better oppor-

tunity; so, bad as this one was, I resolved to take it without further hesitation.

"It is *my* fondest hope and ambition to marry your daughter," I said tremulously.

"Forgive me for startling you by this abrupt announcement——"

I paused, for her expression was one of intense annoyance, not of amazement or surprise.

"You will not be antagonistic to these hopes?" I said, nervously.

"Has my daughter, Clare, encouraged you to nurse them—has *she* been a party to this deceit?" she asked, in cold, calm, cutting accents that made me understand what a very unpleasant thing her displeasure would be when she was my mother-in-law.

I could but remember that it was at Clare's own special request that I had kept my hopes concerning her secret from her mother for one day after I had confided them to Clare herself. It was she who had

hampered and tongue-tied me, but I would not say a word that might bring a passing shadow of blame upon her. Accordingly, I answered, guardedly—

“I will explain the whole matter to you fully and gladly by-and-by,” I said, in a low voice, for the attention of all those at the table was gradually concentrating itself on us. “Meanwhile, let me assure you that your daughter is not to blame in the matter, and that I did not come to you to-day, because when I was freed from the attendance I am bound to give to my aunt on such a day as this, the hour had arrived when you would have refused to see me, I understand.”

She bowed her head acquiescently, and seemed to dismiss the subject from her mind, for her next remark bore reference to the beauty of the carved mantelpiece, and the glowing grandeur of the decorations of the banqueting hall.

"We have a ghost in our family, of course," I said, gaily, in my gladness of heart at not receiving any further reprimand just then ; "but it's a very harmless one. Never appears or frightens people ; only rings bells, and clatters down crockery at night sometimes."

"Indeed," she replied, without the slightest effort to assume an interest she evidently did not feel in my family bogie.

"The supernatural has no charms for you, possibly ?" I questioned, in mere idleness, and she gave me a defiant stare, with eyes that seemed suddenly to have grown inflamed, for answer. Soon after this my aunt gave the signal for the ladies to retire, and again Paulton and I drew nearer to one another, and indulged in a little confidential chat, leaving the general conversation to the other men.

This time the mother was our theme.

"She's a stately-looking woman, and her

diamonds are fine," Paulton said, nodding his head in the direction of the seat Mrs. St. John had occupied ; " but if I were in your place I shouldn't care to have her much in my house in the winter. The woman's like a black frost."

" I am afraid she won't be all my fancy has painted a mother-in-law," I replied, trying to speak in jocular tones ; " however, I'm to have it out with her about Clare this evening, so I shall try to behave as if I believed her to be one of the most tender and genial of God's creatures."

" You'll have to make a supreme effort to do that," he rejoined, absently, and then, without taking any notice of my attempt to reply to him, he added—

" I shouldn't like to say whose creature I think she is ; but for the sake of ' auld lang syne,' old boy, I hope I shan't often see that handsomest and worst of faces at *your* fireside."

“Clare isn’t a bit like her, is she?” I said, quickly, and apparently irrelevantly; and he replied—

“No; honestly, *no*! If she were”—he jumped up without saying what he would have done in that case, but I inferred from his confused laugh and manner that he had been on the brink of saying that, if Clare had been like her mother, he would have striven to cut me out for the sake of freeing me.

He went away to the drawing-room then, and I saw him go in perfect confidence. I *knew* now that my friend would never be my rival, and that not so much because of my relying entirely on his loyalty, as because I saw that he was to a certain extent in doubt and fear of Mrs. St. John. That phrase which he had used about her kept on ringing in my mind—

“I shouldn’t like to say whose ‘creature’ I think she is. I hope I shan’t often see

that handsomest and worst of faces at your fireside."

I tried to feel annoyed with Paulton for making such remarks about Clare's mother; but annoyance was not the predominating feeling in my mind when, after a time, I went into the room and found Paulton sitting aloof from the others, watching Mrs. St. John with an expression of stern displeasure on his face.

"What is it?" I muttered, sitting near to him.

"What is it? You may ask! Look at the damage done to that beautiful cross that Miss St. John made this afternoon. Mrs. St. John knocked it down in a way that was too clumsy to be accidental; and when Clare sprang up to rescue it she withered the girl with such a look as I hope I may never see a mother give a daughter again. She's an irreligious old lady, Eric, and an irreligious woman is—

not what your wife's mother ought to be."

"We must go into the hall now and hear the carols," my aunt called out. "Eric, take Mrs. St. John down."

But Mrs. St. John refused to go, and gave me to understand that she would rather I remained with her and discuss that point which had been mooted at dinner.

I was torn to pieces by conflicting interests. To stay behind would be to vex and hurt my aunt, who could not see one of the sweet old customs disregarded without a pang. To go would be to anger Mrs. St. John, who had a senseless prejudice against all observances, religious and otherwise, that had special reference to this happiest and holiest of days. I resolved to go, whatever might betide.

While we stood in the hall listening to the carols, we saw Mrs. St. John sweeping

her velvet draperies upstairs, with a lighted candle in her hand, evidently on her way to her bedroom.

“Let us escort her through the haunted corridor to the door of her own chamber,” I whispered to Clare, and we followed her quickly, and gained her side just as she came to within a couple of yards of her bedroom door.

This door stood open about half a yard, and the leaping firelight played through the wide aperture out on to the opposite wall of the corridor, as Clare began saying—

“Mamma, dear, we saw you stealing off——”

The door was firmly and quietly closed in our faces. It did not bang. There was no jerk. It was as if a strong, steady hand pushed it firmly from the other side, and there was even a little extra pressure given to make the latch go securely into the socket.

“Some one must be in the room, mamma,” Clare cried out, and in a moment she had opened the door, and we all three stood in the bedroom, in which there was all the usual furniture of a luxurious sleeping apartment to be seen, and nothing more.

“Some one *must* have been here a moment ago,” Clare said, excitedly. “Eric, do search; mother may be frightened out of her wits.”

“I’ll not allow any search to be made here to-night—I am too sleepy,” Mrs. St. John said, yawningly. “It was the draught, of course, or a cat. I like cats in my room: their purring soothes me. Good-night, Mr. ‘Eric,’ as Clare called you in her excitement. You and I will have our talk to-morrow morning.”

She pushed us out playfully, kissing her daughter, and shaking me heartily by the hand, begging us both not to let anyone come and disturb her. And so we left that strange woman alone that night, and saun-

tered back slowly to rejoin our friends—I, with my heart full of bright anticipations of a successful suit; Clare, with her heart full of—what?

“At any rate your mother does not mean to say me nay altogether, darling,” I whispered. “We broke the ice at dinner, and she knows what I want, at least.”

“Yet, knowing that, she won’t let me go in and say a few words, and hear a few words from her to-night; my mother *is* a strange woman,” Clare said, thoughtfully.

“Is she a happy woman?” I was impelled to ask. And Clare replied—

“That’s so hard to say—she is a variable woman. There are times when she seems to throw off all recollection of whatever it is that saddens and deadens her so completely at others. Her coming here to stay, even for one night, is a great move in the right direction. You must help me to cheer her up, and draw her away from her own home,

and that old habit of shutting herself up every day. Won't you, Eric?"

It may be supposed that I responded heartily enough to this appeal, which identified me so completely with Clare's nearest interests; and it was with a feeling of greater satisfaction concerning her personally, as regarded myself, that I had experienced during the brief term of my engagement that I went back to join in the games and forfeits, the impromptu charades and ghost stories, and finally the closing scene of the loving-cup being borne round and tasted by everybody.

The goblet that had been used as the loving-cup on these and similar occasions for many generations at Glayton Hall was a fine specimen of engraved glass, and had, moreover, an additional value in the eyes of the Westertons from the fact of its having been presented by George the First to a daughter of our house, who had married

one of the Hanoverian followers of the king. This lady, dying without issue, had left all her personal belongings back to her own family, and amongst these effects was the king's loving-cup, which was held in high esteem. It was bound in silver, and had massive silver handles, by which it was carried round by my aunt's old butler, who regarded his share in the performance as a solemn and most highly honourable one.

My dear old aunt tasted it first, "wishing all the holiest, happiest things that the season could suggest and supply" to each one of us, and it had nearly gone the round of the merry circle in safety, when Mrs. St. John came swiftly into our midst. She looked cold and worn, and, moved by an impulse of pity for her evident suffering, I jumped up, took her hand, and motioning to the butler to bring the cup of spiced and steaming wine closer to her, said—

"It was good of you to come back for the loving cup. You must——"

"Drink it in humble and grateful remembrance of the birth of Him who reconciled God to sinners," my aunt interrupted cheerfully, and as she spoke Mrs. St. John put her hand out; whether to push the goblet away or to take it we never clearly understood. But at any rate it slipped from its silver rim and handles, and fell shivered to a thousand splinters at her feet.

It was a family calamity, and caused the utmost consternation. My aunt could not restrain her tears, though she struggled hard not to let Mrs. St. John see how bitterly the loss of the heir-loom affected her. For my own part I was conscious of a sudden irrepressible and just feeling of resentment against Mrs. St. John as the cause of the catastrophe, though she triumphantly pointed to the silver rim and handles which still remained in the butler's hands as a proof

that the accident had not been caused by her action.

"The cement has given way in the order of things," she said, scornfully.

"The handles were riveted on, madam," the butler put in, respectfully. "How those rivets came out is more than mortal man can tell me, I'm thinking."

"I shall send you a much handsomer goblet of Venetian glass, Mrs. Westerton. It will not be the gift of a king, certainly, but it shall be in better taste, and of a rarer quality than King George's loving-cup."

"It's not as the gift of a king that I valued it chiefly," Mrs. Westerton replied, "but I remember all the Christian words of love and tenderness, of charity and liberality, that have been uttered when that loving cup has been going its rounds in this house."

"And you're disappointed to find that those words have been powerless to save it

now that its hour has come," Mrs. St. John said, with affected sympathy; and I felt pained and indignant that she should have no real feeling about a matter which was a serious trouble to the family which she knew her daughter would probably soon enter.

It would have been impossible after this to get up anything like genuine mirth and hilarity, therefore we all soon said good-night, and retired to our respective chambers.

About an hour after I had gone to bed, and while my mind was still dreamily revolving the events of the day, there came a low tap at my door, and presently Paulton stood by my bedside.

He looked startled but not frightened; and, as he hastily threw me my dressing-gown, he whispered—

"Get up, old fellow, as quickly as you can, and tell me what form your hereditary ghost takes."

"Merely noises, footsteps, smashings of crockery, which is found in the morning not to be smashed, and so on," I replied : and he said—

"Come out into the corridor with me."

And I followed him willingly enough, for I had no faith in the ghostly tradition of our race.



CHAPTER IV.

A FATAL 'STEP.

THE clear winter night light streamed in through the deep bay window at the end of the corridor, revealing every object in it plainly even without the aid of the bright lamp which Paulton carried. The snow was lying lightly on the feathery boughs of the larch and the willow, and massively on the laurels and dark Scotch firs. The lawn was one unbroken sheet of unsullied snow, and over all the moon was riding, silvering the scene. The beauty of this white world so charmed my attention that I paid no heed to anything else, but stood looking out on its beauty, which was unruffled by the lightest breeze, for a few moments, till Paulton recalled me to the work in hand by saying—

“Listen!”

I turned my back to the outside world, where not the lightest bough was being swayed by the wind, and looked down the length of the corridor, along which a rushing, mighty wind seemed to be sweeping. When he first spoke it sounded like a far-off gale, but rapidly it came nearer and nearer, until with a moaning roar, that struck a chill to our hearts and blanched our cheeks, that dreadful wind passed us, and swept through the window.

We got back into my room, made up the fire, and cast ourselves into arm-chairs on either side of it, determining to wait up and watch for the recurrence of the ominous sound, which Paulton had heard twice before he had disturbed me. But we waited in vain. That bitter blast, by whatsoever agency it might have been produced, blew no more that night, and when the fire burnt low and threatened to go out the spirit of

investigation faded within us, and we went to our respective beds.

Paulton and I had agreed that we would not make any secret of our weird experience. The phenomenon of a still night outside the walls, and a gale of wind inside, was too remarkable a one to be kept from the others. Accordingly, we being the earliest at the breakfast-table, asked each one as they came in how he or she had passed the night.

With one exception all declared that the roaring of the wind had disturbed them at intervals, but no one had taken the trouble to rise up and look out upon the night. All had slept in closely-curtained, securely-shuttered rooms, and a little wind more or less had made very little difference to them.

The one exception was Mrs. St. John. She had heard nothing.

"I sleep like a child," she explained;

"just as calmly and deeply. Nothing disturbs me."

"That proves the goodness of your digestion and the purity of your conscience," Paulton said. "Now, Eric and I must have something on our minds, or our livers must be out of order," and then he went on to tell the story of the night wind.

Everyone listened to it, and everyone had some theory to advance about it—tiles off the roof, broken window panes in the lower part of the house, open cellar doors, the mere natural effect of cold air meeting two heated bodies fresh from their warm beds. These and other solutions of the mystery were offered to Paulton and myself freely, and we were looked upon as rather weak-minded because we did not seem ready to accept them without further inquiry.

Mrs. St. John was the only one who was at all congenial in her manner of treating the subject.

"I quite agree with Mr. Paulton and Eric," she said, cordially. (Her calling me "Eric" made me look at every word she uttered as a pearl of wisdom.) "It is a very unaccountable thing that a high wind should be blowing in a corridor when there is not a breath stirring outside the house. I am glad I did not hear it."

"You really shouldn't encourage the boys in their foolish attempts to frighten us," my aunt said, laughing; and Mrs. St. John replied that, though she had no fear of or belief in such supernatural signs and wonders herself, she was very lenient in her judgment of those who were more credulous.

"I wish I had known that; I'd have roused you up last night. You would have been just the addition we wanted to our party," Paulton said, looking at her fixedly; and she returned his gaze with steady strength, and her voice never trembled as

she said she wished he had called her to join them.

She insisted upon returning home that morning before luncheon. I was her escort, and before we reached The Keg I was her accepted son-in-law as well. She spoke very frankly and honestly to me, telling me that, of the two, she would rather have given her daughter Clare to Paulton than to me—not only because his property was as large as mine, and he would have a title, but because his physique was so fine.

“Clare’s beauty is beyond description. I have also looked forward to her marrying an equally handsome man, and founding a family that should be unequalled on the face of the earth for beauty. You are merely a good-looking man, Eric, so that dream is over. Still, I am very well satisfied; my race is nearly run, and I want to see both my daughters settled.”

I stumbled out a few sentences about her

still youthful and vigorous appearance, and tried to add, cordially—

“I was going to say you ought not to wish to condemn yourself to long years of loneliness ; but your daughter Clare’s house will be your home whenever you care to make it yours.”

“Thank you, but a house of my own is essential to my well-being. I do not readily fall into other people’s ways, nor do they always like mine. Now go back to Clare, Eric, and tell her I have given her over to your safe keeping.”

She rose up, looking all at once intensely weary, and held out her hand in farewell. I took the hand, and as I did so I said—

“Come out and see the skating this afternoon. I mean to make Clare a proficient in the art.”

“Take care of her. I am always nervous about ice.”

“You *may* trust her with me ; she’s as

dear to me as my own life already," I said, warmly.

"Don't let Alice go on," she continued, anxiously. "There will be no one there to whom she is as dear as life. Pray don't let Alice go on."

The genuine maternal solicitude touched me deeply.

"Come down with us to the lake, and see for yourself that no risk is run. We'll call in for you on our way to the lake this afternoon."

"At what time?"

"At about half-past two or quarter to three."

"It is *impossible* that I can go at that time," she exclaimed, stamping her foot vehemently at me. "Why choose that—*that* hour?"

"Because the morning is gone; and, by the time we have lunched, that hour will have come," I said, rather stolidly, for I

had no intention of allowing what I looked upon as her foolish whim to interfere with the healthy exercise I intended teaching Clare to take upon the ice.

“Well, well, if you must go at *that* time I must deny myself the pleasure of seeing you skate, Eric,” she said, with a sudden relapse into good humour, or rather with a sudden throwing off of constraint and chilliness; and in the enthusiasm of my gratitude to her for having looked with such smiling eyes upon my suit to Clare I bent and kissed her hand with all the homage and affection I could infuse into my manner.

She snatched her hand away quickly, as if my lips had stung her, and then, I suppose in reply to my look of mortified astonishment, she said—

“I have been so long out of the world, I am so unused to such demonstrations—do forgive me for having for the moment forgotten that you are to be my son.”

"I was afraid I had offended you," I said, in relieved tones.

"No, no, nothing of the kind, Eric; but don't do it again—it is not pleasing to——"

She paused and looked uneasily over her shoulder, and my eyes followed the direction of hers, fully expecting to light upon some living object in the distant part of the room into which she was gazing.

However, there was no one there; so presently, throwing off the impression that I had half expected to see some one, I took my final leave of Mrs. St. John (without anything resembling a demonstration this time), and made my way back to the Hall, where I found them all waiting for me at the luncheon-table.

It was as brilliant a winter's scene as I have ever witnessed in this country that afternoon on Glayton lake. Our friends from many miles round had responded to the

notifications we had sent out to the effect that "the ice would bear with perfect safety," and the broad surface of the lake was bright and gay with skimming figures in every conceivable kind of becoming winter costume.

But, though all our county belles and beauties were present in charming array, it was conceded by every man, and by nearly every woman, that Clare bore away the palm. She led the eye irresistibly off the others, though her dress was remarkably plain. Blue sailor-serge, tight-fitting, and short, without even a kilted flounce to redeem the studied severity of the skirt. A tight-fitting round fur collar, high up round her throat, cuffs of the same fur, and a little *toque*, or hat, of two shades, of rich crimson velvet.

That was Clare's dress on this day, when she was first introduced to the county as my future bride, and the congratulations

that were showered upon me were hearty and incessant.

After that first brief glamour which had been thrown over her by Paulton, Clare St. John was the most frankly loving and devoted *fiancée* that the heart of the most exacting lover could desire.

During the days that ensued of this happy Christmas visit she surrendered herself entirely to my aunt and myself, striving arduously to learn all the ways, and habits, and customs that would be looked for in my wife by my county friends. She ingratiated herself equally with our equals and dependants, and gave us all fully to understand that the fate which was before her of a life-long residence at Glayton Hall was the fairest fate her imagination had ever pictured.

So sweetly and with such pure and perfect ingenuousness did she identify herself with us and our plans and interests

that my aunt, who had long objected to my continual absences in London, became more and more urgent that the marriage should take place with as little delay as was compatible with the completion of the necessary preparations and arrangements, and I backed up her argument with all the eloquence I had at command.

Clare was honestly acquiescent in our wishes, but she seemed doubtful about her mother being ready to resign her just yet. However, after a few serious conversations with Mrs. St. John, she agreed to all I proposed; and when the two girls went home, at the expiration of the Christmas week, it was with the full understanding that our marriage was to take place on the 15th of February.

I left my bride elect, and went up to town with Paulton and the others, to settle up the affairs of my London life, give notice to leave my official post, and select as many

rich and rare gifts for Clare as my banker's account would stand. These matters detained me in town until four or five days before the one fixed for my wedding, when, with a heart beating lightly as a feather in my breast, I left for the Hall accompanied by Paulton, whom it was arranged should be my best man.

Early as it was in the year there was a spring-like mildness and geniality about the atmosphere that day that was congenial with the bright and balmy prospect before me, and my spirits had never been higher in my life than they were, reasonably enough, on this occasion. Paulton caught the infection from me, and I am sure I am within bounds in saying that no two men travelled by any train that day with fewer forebodings of evil in their minds, or dread of any untoward event in their hearts. I make this statement distinctly in order that it may be understood that we were not ready to see

portents nor to dream dreams, and though I shall note down what took place on our journey, I shall do so merely because the ghastly after-events appeared to give them a significance which they certainly did not possess for us as we were whirled along to the beautiful Hall and more beautiful bride awaiting me.

The carriage in which we travelled was a first-class one, and besides ourselves there were only two passengers in it. One was a middle-aged lady, whom I afterwards discovered to be the maiden aunt of a pretty, fresh-faced, prosaic-looking girl of about seventeen. They were lively, talkative, open-hearted people, filled with a longing to take their companions of the moment into their confidence. Before we had been together an hour they had let us gather from their conversation whence they had come, whither they were going, and whom they hoped to meet. Friendly and frank, full of life and of the business of pleasure,

they chimed in well with my gay and happy mood that day, and Paulton and I soon found ourselves chatting as freely to them as if we had known them for twelvemonths.

We were in the midst of a loud and laughter-fraught conversation when a keen blast of wind whistled through the carriage, making us involuntarily shudder and draw the travelling wraps, which the mildness of the day had induced us to cast off, more closely around us. Bitter, startling, and extraordinary as this unexpected breeze was, it awoke no recollections in my mind at the time, and I should probably not have paused to comment upon it had not the young girl checked herself in a merry sally to say—

“Oh, what a wind! It seems to have chilled my heart. Aunt Meggy, didn’t you feel it?”

“Yes; it’s a terrible climate,” Aunt Meggy rejoined. “Scorched one moment and frozen the next. I shall be glad to find

myself back in Nice. Last week we were gathering roses and violets there in the warm sunshine, and we should be there now but this child would come over to the wedding, as I told you just now."

"No, you didn't say a wedding; you said 'A happy occasion,'" I replied. And the happy, middle-aged lady laughed, and said—

"Well, isn't a wedding the 'happiest occasion' of all to which friends and old schoolfellows could be summoned?"

"The bride is such a beauty too," the girl struck in. "It's two years since I saw her, and then she promised me I should be one of her bridesmaids when she married. She *was* such a favourite at school."

"I am going to a wedding, too," I said, consciously, and then they soon drew from me that I was going to my own wedding; and I gleaned from them that Clare, my bonnie bride, was the beautiful schoolfellow of whom my younger fellow-traveller had

been speaking, After this it was all plain sailing on a summer sea of perfectly fair understanding, and the remainder of our journey was as blithe, as free from foreboding of any form of unpleasantness, as thoroughly enjoyable a thing as can well be imagined.

Our marriage was fixed to take place on Thursday, the 15th, and it was on Friday the 9th, that we went down to Glayton. I found everything exactly as I could have wished it to be—Clare blooming with health and happiness, and full of flatteringly eager expectation of seeing me; all the preparations for the wedding in an advanced state, and a suite of rooms refurnished with the most perfect taste, in Glayton Hall, for the special use of my future wife.

Indeed, there was something almost overwhelming in the tender, generous thoughtfulness with which my dear old aunt had provided for every possible want that Clare

might have in her new home. A beautiful miniature brougham, a dashing little Victoria, and pair of superb iron grey ponies, had been purchased, and were already known as the "young mistress's."

Everything that the heart of woman could desire for herself, or that the heart of man could desire for the woman he loved best, was there in its appropriate place awaiting her. And, better than all else, the warmest place in my good aunt's heart was already given to her coming niece.

I found Mrs. St. John and the general life at The Keg unaltered in all respects. The picturesque, peculiar house was full now of lively young people, who had come down to be Clare's bridesmaids; but, though her house was full of guests, Mrs. St. John still absented herself from them daily, and suffered no interruption.

The day before the wedding was a busy one with us. Our own family lawyer had

come about signing the settlements, and for the first time it was found that Mrs. St. John had nothing either to give or to leave to her daughters. She resolutely declined to say whether she was living upon an income or only upon the capital, and, as I only wanted Clare, I declined to have her pressed on the point. I had enough for us both, and only wanted my darling at the hands of her mother.

After the legal business was over, Clare, Alice, Paulton, and I went out for a ride through the lanes, where the primroses were beginning to sweetly and modestly herald the coming spring. Clare was an inexperienced but a graceful and courageous horsewoman, and I had no manner of doubt as to the propriety of putting her on a high-bred, spirited horse, whose temper I thoroughly knew.

Alice, who was equally inexperienced, but who had less courage, rode a steady old

ambling mare, who was incapable of doing anything rash or unsteady, and on whose back I believed her to be as in an arm-chair.

We were coming home, and had just entered the park, above the private roads that lead to The Keg, when the old mare put her foot into a rabbit-hole, stumbled, floundered wildly for a moment or two, and then toppled down on her head, rolling completely over, and crushing Alice under her.

She was quite insensible when we extricated her, and we were a broken-hearted group as we carried her to her mother's house.

"The mistress is in her own room, and must not be disturbed," the old servant said, firmly. "No, not even on account of this."

But Paulton raved against the bigoted folly of yielding to a whim at such a moment. And when the doctor came he

said the injury was an internal one, and that Alice must inevitably die unless an immediate operation was performed, for which her mother's consent was necessary.

Then, in an evil moment, I implored, entreated, commanded my Clare to go to her mother; and, after shrinking and demurring, she let me lead her to the door, which was never locked, she had told me before, Mrs. St. John's will being sufficient to guard it.

"I must see you, mother—a matter of life or death!" the poor girl moaned. Then she opened the door and went in.

A moment or two passed, I standing close to the door, with bated breath and beating heart. Then there arose such a scream as I pray neither I nor mortal man may ever hear again, and in another instance Clare came staggering out, her eyes bloodshot, her face chalky white with unutterable horror.

"Save Alice, and never ask me to see my mother again," she groaned; and then Nature was merciful to her, and blotted out the recollection of the awful mystery she had discovered by suffering her to become insensible.

I left her in the charge of her old school-fellow and the good maiden aunt, and went back to authorise the operation on Alice. Until that was performed I said nothing of what had occurred; but when Alice was sleeping peacefully, under the influence of a narcotic, I told the doctor what had transpired upstairs.

"Let us be men and penetrate this mystery, which is either a sin or a sham, Mr. Spencer," he said. "The woman must be mad to have frightened one daughter out of her senses while the other one was in peril of her life. Let us go and appeal to her motherhood, and get her to give over this imposture."



CHAPTER V.

THE WEDDING-DAY.

PROMPTLY and tenderly the dead body, which was still warm when we found it, was removed, by order of the doctor, to her own bedroom, and then he and I consulted together as to what must be done next.

I was so shocked and frightened, to tell the truth, at what had happened that I do not know of what untoward negligence I might have been guilty in that awful hour had it not been for the firmness and good sense of my friend Paulton. It was at his suggestion that the door of the room in which that most unhappy lady, Mrs. St. John, had died was locked and sealed by the doctor and myself, until such time as

her daughters or daughter might authorise a search to be made in it. And it was also at his suggestion that I sent for my aunt in order that she might break the tidings of her mother's unaccountable death to my poor Clare, who had by this time recovered consciousness.

Consciousness seemed to be an agony to her, poor girl, from what those who were in attendance upon her told me at intervals. She had opened her eyes, looked wildly into the sympathising faces that were bending over her, and then, with a groaning entreaty that they "would leave her alone to die, if she could," she had buried her face in the pillow, and fallen into the saddest and most prolonged fit of tearless sobbing that it has been my lot to hear, or to hear of. It was in vain that they appealed to her to control herself on account of her sister, who was in dire peril; in vain that they endeavoured to remind her of me, and of my cruel anxiety.

The sobbing continued ceaselessly, and at last the doctor, who was called in to her, came to me in evident alarm, and told me that the sobbing had become convulsive, and that he must have the opinion of a brother practitioner as to whether it would not be advisable to try the effect of telling her of her mother's death.

For many hours my aunt and I stoutly opposed this being done, urging that any further shock to a frame so entirely exhausted, and a mind so cruelly overwrought, would be fatal to her. But at length our opposition grew weaker, and with a dread upon me that I cannot describe, and dare not attempt to analyse, I consented that this racking, torturing, possible remedy might be applied to the woman who would have been my wife in a few hours but for these terrible events.

In the meantime we were happily spared all anxiety on Alice's account. She had

awakened from a deep, restful sleep, to be pronounced out of danger, and she was easily led to believe that it was solely on her own account that she was not permitted to see either her mother or sister.

It was agonising to me to hear her say, with a little laugh, that she "hoped poor mamma had not been disturbed in her dear little room, on account of her foolish tumble," Paulton told me, with a shudder, coming to me with the latest report from Alice's couch, before we applied that desperate crucial test to my shattered Clare. He had fallen into the brotherly part quite naturally, the good fellow, and the reflection that he was in the house nerved me to the task at last of going to Clare's side, and stabbing her bleeding heart afresh with the news of her mother's death.

But, fully as I realised that the task before me was as ghastly a one as a man could be called upon to perform—for the fear was

paramount in all our breasts that Clare would accuse herself of having been the cause of her mother's death—the ghastliness of what followed came upon me unawares, and found me utterly unprepared.

They were standing round her bed—a grave and harassed group—when I led my brave old aunt in. A shaded lamp burnt at the foot of the bed, throwing its soft, mysterious light on Clare's throbbing form. There was such a sound of terror in her sobs that I think it nerved me to say quickly what I had to say, for I felt that come what would my poor girl could not suffer more.

Accordingly I drew her clenched hand away from the face that was pressed down tightly against it on the pillow, bent my own head down closely to her, and in tones that were tender as were my thoughts of her, I began—

“My love—my Clare ! be brave, and control yourself, for my sake. Get up, my

sweet, and go to Alice, your sister, who has been in dreadful danger, and will want you now. You are all in all to her now, Clare. Your mother is——”

“My mother is— What do you say?” she cried, with a shriek of rage and pain that sent the others crouching away from the bed in a panic, and as she shrieked she rose up, and beating her arms out wildly on either side, she forced even me away from her, and stood there alone in her appalling horror and her unnatural rage.

Into what was she transformed? All traces of the beauty that had been so glorious had vanished now from her ashen grey face and burning, vengeful-looking eyes. Better far that we had let her sob herself to death than that we should have roused this unfilial devil in her by the mention of her mother.

Half-maddened, sickened, and painfully uncertain as to what it was best to do, and what was expected of me, I stammered out

in haste, shrinking from her, and with little tenderness, I fear—

“For your own sake be patient, and try to think lovingly and forgivingly of your mother, for she is dead.”

Her whole aspect seemed to change and lighten, and with a low cry of the most intense relief she fell back upon the bed in another fainting fit, which would “prove a blessed restorative to her,” the doctor said.

My aunt and I waited until we heard that Clare had been again restored to consciousness, and that she appeared much calmer and better, and then we left that house of woe, and desolation, and dark mystery, and walked home, in the grey cold dawn of what should have been my wedding-day, to the Hall, where the steps were all covered with red cloth, and the wedding breakfast was spread bravely in the banqueting-hall. The orders for the perfecting of all the preparations with due speed had not been can-

celled, and there they were to mock me now with their gorgeous air of festival.

"I will leave you to Charlie Paulton now," Mrs. Westerton said, tenderly kissing me on my forehead; "but, my poor boy, sooner or later you and I must face this out. And I say the sooner the better. I can do nothing without you and you must do nothing without me."

"I can never forget that look that was on *her* face for one moment," I said, brokenly. "I shall always see it—always dread seeing it now."

"Not if she does what I will pray she may be led to do—tell you the reason why that look lived there even for one moment; but not a word more now, Eric. Take him to his room, Charlie, and make him feel all the comfort that can be felt from friendship when love is on its trial in a man's heart."

'Then she went away to her room to pray,

VOL. I. 7

I knew—to pray for all those who were troubled, and specially for such as could not or would not pray for themselves. Verily I felt the calming holy influence of that good woman's prayers in the atmosphere around me on that dreariest of days.

About noon a messenger came up from The Keg.

“Miss St. John is much better, seems quite to have recovered her nerve, in fact; and wished us all to go down and be with her while the looking-glass room was being searched.”

From the phrasing of this message we all three concluded that Clare had resolved not to be present at this painful ceremony; but when we, in prompt obedience to her request, went down to The Keg, we found her standing calm and passive in the hall with the key of the looking-glass room in her hand, and the avowed determination to conduct the search herself on her lips.

She greeted me very sadly, but sweetly, and with an evident unconsciousness of there having been anything in her conduct to alarm me about her, or alter my feelings towards her in any way.

“Eric, my darling, it’s an awful thing to ask you to bear me company into that room where my poor mother died on our wedding-day,” she whispered, clasping her arms round my neck, burying her face in my bosom, and thrilling me by the passionate tenderness of her tones. And I, actuated by I know not what feeling, shivered, and was conscious that I shrank from her, even while I pitied and loved her more than ever.

There was something in her chastened beauty that was very touching to all of us when presently she led the way up the stairs, and paused for a moment after turning the key in that doorway, through which she had fled in such mortal dread only the day before.

But she only paused to say in pathetic, pleading accents, that went home straight to our hearts, looking round as she spoke—

“Let everyone who will come in. I am sure nothing will be found here that my poor mother would not willingly have shown to anyone in her life-time.”

I thought I heard the words “Clap-trap!” spoken under the breath close by my side; but looking up quickly, and seeing that it was Paulton who stood by me, I fancied that I must have been mistaken. Then Clare stepped right into the room, and we followed her.

The room was precisely in the same order in which the doctor, Paulton, and I had left it the day before, when we had the body that had held that most unhappy soul carried out. Perfect neatness and an unpleasant glare, that was all that was to be seen. Not a single phial, or scrap or sign of anything that could have destroyed life.

Rigid neatness and barrenness, that was all; and we were turning away, professing either satisfaction at not finding anything, or our sorrow at not finding something—in our emotional confusion we were not very lucid—and preparing to leave the painful precinct, when Paulton said—

“You have forgotten that cabinet, Miss St. John. The doctor and I sealed it up yesterday, but the key is in it, I see, and its contents may throw some light upon Mrs. St. John’s unaccountably sudden death.”

“That cabinet contains family papers—private family papers, not legal ones—only,” Clare said, knitting her brows slightly as she answered Paulton, and there was an uncomfortable silence in the room for several moments.

Then my aunt spoke softly, her voice trembling with feeling; and when her voice trembled one felt so sure that the emotion was not feigned.

“Clare, my child,” she said, “Mr. Paulton is right. For Eric’s sake, you must do away with all painful doubt by opening that cabinet at once.”

Clare’s face darkened, and I turned away in dread of seeing *that* look come over it again. But in an instant she shook off the cloud, and, saying wistfully, “If Eric wishes it,” advanced to the cabinet, and broke the seal, then waited for my answer, looking round at me with her heart in her eyes.

“I do wish it,” I said; and she turned the key. The cabinet doors fell open; there were no drawers, only a series of shelves, and on these shelves there was nothing but a few bits of tinder that had once perhaps been papers.

“There,” Clare exclaimed, heaving so heavy a sigh that I could but fancy it was one of relief. “You see there is nothing, not even the family letters which I thought

might be there. Will any one of you like to look more closely?"

She seemed to address us all, but her eyes were fixed on Paulton as she spoke, and again I saw that same repulsion to her, which I had noticed in him before, creep into his manner towards her as he replied—

"If Eric is satisfied, we none of us have a right to differ from him; and if you are convinced that your mother died from natural causes, we are bound to take your view of the case."

"Cruel to speak to me so harshly so soon—so very soon after," she began, sobbingly; but in the midst of her grief she remembered to lock the cabinet, and we were glad, I think, to get out of the horrible room without further parley.

We did not stay long with her that day; her place was with Alice, she said. Alice was getting on well, but it was essential that

she should be kept free from the smallest excitement. Accordingly it had to be assumed by those who were in attendance on her that she could not for a moment desire to see her mother.

“Of all people, Miss Alice, after your accident, your mamma is the last person you ought to ask for,” the old servant, who had really loved her late mistress, mysterious as had been the life, and still more mysterious the death of that mistress, said bravely, forcing herself to play her part without faltering. And the poor girl affected to submit outwardly, but still inwardly pined for that mother who could never come to her more.

“How will you be able to bear Alice’s inquiries?” I said to Clare.

“Without flinching, for her sake,” she replied, quietly ; and then I made my first allusion to what must ensue between us by-and-by.

“The hour of agony for you will be when you have to tell her how you found your mother, and what sent you flying out of the room, my poor darling,” I said, and she answered—

“To *that* I shall never allude, either to her or to anyone else, Eric ; I have suffered too much ever to speak of what caused the suffering ; let the dead past bury its dead, and over my mother’s grave let us forget what was unaccountable in her life and terrible in her death.”

I had no answer ready. How could I combat such a request from a daughter about her dead mother, while that mother was still unburied, and the daughter’s heart might naturally be supposed to be raw with grief? How could I have done it? At any rate I did not do it, and to that act of moral cowardice I may attribute much of the intense misery which was my after-portion. I kept silence, and allowed her to

infer that I was satisfied that she should keep her secret from me.

I was made to feel my folly even in the course of that doleful day which was to have been my marriage one. For awhile, during the time that was spent by the servants in abolishing all traces of those festive preparations which were hideous to us all, I shut myself up in my own room and refused even to see Paulton. But after a time a sense of the folly of such a proceeding came homé to me, and I went down "to face what had to be inevitably faced," as my aunt had advised, without further delay.

Paulton was in the drawing-room alone; my aunt had not yet come down; and I knew, the instant I entered the room, that Paulton would cut to cure without delay.

My intuition was right. 'I had barely got up to the cosy-looking circle of chairs

and couches drawn up towards the fire, before he began—

“Eric, old boy, I won’t ask another question about this affair if you tell me not to do it; but I’ll just say to you, that for your own honour and happiness’ sake, I hope Miss St. John has made a clean breast of her secret to you?”

He spoke earnestly and pitifully, and I could not make up my mind to rebuff him for curiosity that was shown simply out of loving-kindness to me.

“Clare has begged me never to speak to her on the subject again. Don’t look stern and disgusted, Charlie. What can a fellow do when he loves the woman who won’t trust him?”

“Give her up!” he said, distinctly; and though I looked and felt wrathful, I knew that he was right, and that in obeying his dictate I should be obeying that of my own conscience. But I loved her, and clung to her.

“What! give her up because a terrible grief has come upon her in a terrible way? It’s not like you, Charlie, to want to punish the innocent for the guilty—even supposing that poor dead woman was guilty in some occult way. Mrs. St. John’s secret *was* her own——”

“And it has descended to her daughter,” Paulton interrupted. “Yes, Eric, poor old chap! it’s no use paltering with the truth, or trying to salve over disagreeable facts. You can’t blind yourself to this—Miss St. John found out *something* in those fell moments which she passed in her mother’s room, and the fact of her discovering it killed that mother. Now, I ask you, is this a *safe* secret for her to withhold from you? And I tell you what—it is awfully hard to tell you—and that is that you must either give up the girl, or get her to give up her secret.”

“I can’t give up the girl,” I said; and he replied—

“And you fear you won’t get her to give up her secret—that’s about how it stands. Well, Eric, if you marry her she’ll cut you off from me, for she has taken a dislike to me.”

“Or you to her?” I said, quickly; and he said, sadly—

“I wish I could hate as heartily as I distrust her.”



CHAPTER VI.

DOUBTS AND HOPES.

MY aunt touched on the same topic that night, but she did it in a more soothing way.

“Of course you must come to a clear understanding with your future wife before you marry ; but it can’t be done yet, Eric ; you must wait till the freshness of the shock is passed, until Time has been good to her, and brought the healing he always brings to the sorrowing, if they are patient, and if they pray.”

She spoke the last words in so low a tone that it was almost a whisper. Still, I heard them distinctly, and answered them only—

“Do you doubt Clare’s doing that, aunt ?”

“I will not doubt her doing anything

that is good and wise," my good old aunt said, with that smile that was light from the sunshine of her soul. "And you must help her to pray, Eric. You must aid her in every way with all your heart, and soul, and strength, to bear the burden her mother's death must always be to her. You know where to go to ask for the wisdom and the strength to enable you to do this."

I broke down then and shed tears that were not tears of hopelessness, and that surely were no disgrace to my manhood. In the bitter cup I was made to drain on that terrible day there is still the recollection of that one drop of sweetness which I tasted when my aunt brought home to my remembrance the grand assurance that there is always balm in Gilead for such as know how to seek it aright.

Days passed on, and Mrs. St. John was buried in Glayton churchyard, I acting the

part of chief mourner, and all the county people of the neighbourhood sending their carriages to swell the procession, and testify to the high esteem in which my aunt was held. For that is what it all amounted to when looked at in cold blood.

Paulton was not with me. I did not press him to attend, for I was aware that there was something in his mind which, if not exactly antagonistic to the memory of the departed woman, was aught but sympathetic with her. Moreover, to a certain extent, too, he was suspicious of Clare, and whatever my private opinion of Clare might be, I could not endure the idea of seeming to seek his countenance for her, as if I admitted that she was in any way to blame.

Alice was progressing so rapidly and favourably that the doctor undertook to tell her of her mother's death on the day of the funeral. He performed the painful office with such kindly tact that when Clare went

to her sister the latter asked no questions that were not easily answered, and so there was no constraint or awkwardness between the two girls. Alice believed that her mother had died from maternal pain and consternation on hearing of the accident which had befallen her youngest child. Would that I could have shared that comfortable belief. Would that I could have laboured under a like common-place delusion.

The next three weeks or month lagged fearfully. I stayed on at the Hall, partly because I could not bear to go back and be questioned by my former friends in town, and partly because I really did not know what it behoved me to do with regard to Clare. She devoted herself assiduously to her sister, but when she did leave the latter she was always ready to devote herself just as assiduously as ever to me.

Gradually I persuaded myself that it was unfair of me to wish to fathom a secret

which she had surprised, and which could not be considered entirely her own. And when once I felt this, it was easy to go a step further, and think that Paulton and my aunt were interfering in an unseemly manner in trying to make me demand her confidence as a right, or resent her withholding it as a wrong.

It was not till these days were long past that I realized how adroit Clare had been in keeping that wretched point from becoming a moot one between us. She so easily assumed that I took Alice's view of the case that I felt that it would be wantonly cruel and presumptuous on my part to make her understand that I did nothing of the kind. I was a moral coward still, and told myself that I would defer the day of explanation until Alice was entirely restored to health, and Clare completely under my aunt's good influence. "And that day will come quickly when once she is my wife," I

said to myself, and so once again I began to speak of our wedding to Clare.

She resumed the theme as readily and easily as if the interruption it had suffered had been of the most unimportant and prosaic character. It was perfectly marvellous to me the ease with which she discussed a scheme that had been so shockingly shattered. Unquestionably I was obliged to own that there were heights in her nature which I had never scaled, or depths to which I had never descended. She puzzled me supremely in those ante-nuptial days; but she pleased me more superbly still.

So very quietly one May morning, just about three months after her mother's death, I married her.

There were no festivities thought of then; no wedding guests, nor breakfast, nor bridesmaids, nor happy display of any kind. My aunt and I drove to the church alone, and

there we were met by my bride and her sister. The doctor gave her away, and my aunt and Alice signed the register as witnesses. Then we two—Clare and I—started in the miniature brougham, that was hers now, on the journey of life together.



CHAPTER VII.

CLARE "EMBROIDERS."

M FORTNIGHT of rare—almost perfect—happiness ensued. For the first ten days we loitered over English grounds that had been hitherto unknown to both of us—taking trains to small and obscure towns, of whose names we had hitherto been ignorant, and then diverging, as the fancy led us, into the adjacent villages, where we either roughed it for the night at some pretty little roadside inn, or played at a pastoral by getting lodgings in some rose-covered cottage.

Then, at the end of ten days, we ran down to Dover and crossed over to Calais, where Clare had spent some weeks in her

childhood, and here it was that the first cloud arose. Here it was that she first made manifest her invincible determination to trust her husband no more than she had trusted her lover.

She was pointing out the house to me in which they had lived during those days. It was an old half-ruined chateau standing at some distance from the town. There were large gardens round it, and a terrace with broken balustrades, and a black, silent pool filled with rank weeds on the lawn, and altogether, a general air of decayed magnificence.

The gloom of the desolate place evidently affected her spirits, for presently I saw that she had grown very pale, and that there were tears in her eyes.

“Let us get back to life and bustle, and away to Paris as quickly as we can,” I said, taking her hand and laying it on my arm, and endeavouring to draw her away. But

the gloom gathered on her face, and she would not come; she even withdrew her hand, pettishly, saying—

“How tiresome you are, Eric! You are never satisfied unless you are managing, and ordering, and directing—just as if I were a child.”

“I only wanted to divert your mind from some gloomy memory, darling,” I said, with a choking sensation of fear that I should not be able to divert the storm I had so innocently raised.

“There it is, Eric. You want to order my mind and regulate my memory. I do wish *you*, at least, would let me have some peace.”

She turned round as she spoke and gave a long, searching look at the house we had just left. Then she shuddered, whirled round suddenly, and set off walking at such a pace that I could hardly overtake her.

“Now for Paris,” I said, trying to avoid

all disagreeable topics ; and I took out my watch to see what time we had left before our train started.

“I *can't* go to Paris—I hate the very thought of Paris, Eric,” she said, in tones of humble appeal. “Can't we go home instead? I am longing to be at home. Won't you take me home, Eric?”

“You were so eager to go to Paris only this morning,” I protested.

“And now I am eager to get home to see Alice and your aunt. Now Eric,” and as she spoke the smile came back to her lovely face, and she resumed her old coaxing manner—“now Eric, doesn't it please you that I should be anxious to get back to the dear home where you and I are to spend our lives together?”

“Yes,” I said, but I said it hesitatingly ; for the manner in which her anxiety had betrayed itself had set me thinking and doubting I knew not what.

When we got back to our hotel, and the orders were given for our packing, and the time for our departure for England fixed, her spirits rose, and she became so brilliantly vivacious that I felt it to be an impossibility that she could have any real, definite cause for retrospective sadness. Accordingly, longing to set myself quite at rest on the subject, I said—

“What a charming trio your mother and you two girls must have been in those days when you lived at the chateau—for I suppose then she was a bright young woman with no gloomy fancies about secluding herself every day——”

“Eric,” she stormed out, “if you ever refer to that again I’ll leave you. I vow I will. I’ll leave you, and leave no trace behind me, and you shall never learn to what death or destination you have driven me. I mean it, Eric—I mean it!”

She was shivering with the intensity of

her passion as she spoke, and I realised fully that this wife of mine was possessed by a spirit I could neither combat nor quell.

After this it need scarcely be said that our homeward journey was not a pleasant one. She was wrapt in her own reflections, which, apparently, were of not too pleasing a nature, nearly the whole time, and I was looking forward with chagrin to the day when it should dawn upon my aunt—to say nothing of Paulton, my other friends and the old servants at the Hall—that I had made a mistake. I telegraphed on to announce our unexpected return. Nevertheless, I knew that our coming back in this way would seriously discompose the Glayton people, who had arranged to give us a grand reception a week hence. However, the carriage met us at the station, and my aunt and Alice St. John met us on the Hall steps, with all the servants smiling a smile of welcome behind them, and so far all was well.

I have said that my aunt had beautifully redecorated and refurnished a suite of rooms for Clare's special use. These consisted of a boudoir, study, and dressing-room, which latter communicated with our bedroom on one side and the boudoir on the other. The first alteration which Clare insisted upon making in these already perfect rooms was to have the door between the boudoir and dressing-room blocked up. "Rooms that open one into the other have no privacy," she said; and at the word "privacy" my heart fell.

Now that I had come to reside altogether at the Hall my aunt was desirous that I should take an active part in the management of the estate. She wanted me to be personally known by, and interested in, every tenant and every labourer.

"Remember that when I am dead you will have absolute control over an immense number of your fellow-creatures, Eric; for

the love of the great God who has given you all these things, learn to use that power wisely and well while I am still alive," she would say to me in her dear, simple, earnest, single-hearted way. And I, loving dearly to please her, and wishing with all my heart to fit myself to be a worthy successor to her, gave my hearty interest and co-operation to all those who needed.

Necessarily the duties of my station—for I was soon on the magisterial bench, and was appointed, by universal consent, Master of the West County Foxhounds—took me away from Clare and home a great deal. But she had her own circle, her own sister, and her own occupations, and I firmly believed that she was as happy as she seemed.

But, after a time, little disturbing elements were floating about in the domestic atmosphere. The old servants—each one of whom had been familiar with me from my boyhood—found it a task beyond their

strength to please the young mistress, who never seemed satisfied unless she could convict one or other of them of having forgotten or but half executed some of her orders. Her complaints of them to me were incessant. Their murmurs to my aunt about her unreasonableness were frequent. The once harmonious household was thoroughly out of tune, and yet no one could say that Clare actually interfered.

At length the smouldering fire broke forth. Clare's own maid, a woman who had come to her from an old friend of Mrs. Westerton's on our marriage, was the first to go. Some disagreement between her mistress and herself, which occurred one afternoon when I was out, roused the maid to give the usual month's notice. Clare, in a fury, ordered her out of the house within the hour, and declared that if ever she gave her a character at all, it should be for being a prying, violent, untrustworthy woman.

The first I heard of this disturbance was from Clare herself, whom I found crying in her dressing-room when I came in late one autumn evening after a few hours' coursing.

"Not dressed yet, darling!" I said, looking in at her. "Baines ought to have got you ready before this."

"Baines is a vile, wretched woman, and I have turned her out of the house," she cried, starting up.

"My dear Clare, *what* have you done?" I asked in amazement, coming further into the room, for to "turn a servant out" was a thing that had never happened at the Hall before.

"Sent her away—the spying prying liar!" she cried, stammering in her excitement and anger.

"There can be nothing for her to spy out or pry into. I wish you hadn't been so rash, Clare," I said, in vexed tones, for I knew how this circumstance would annoy

my aunt, and prejudice the other servants still more against Clare.

"It's all very well for you to say that, Eric—you who are out of the house all day long, and who don't know what it is to have your actions questioned, or your will thwarted."

"Does anyone question your actions or thwart your will?" I asked, wonderingly, for I had imagined that my wife was a bird of freedom.

"The servants are *always* about in my way; these rooms, I was given to understand, were *my own*."

"Does anyone invade them? Surely you have not complained if your maid has come into your dressing-room?"

"I complain that I can never come into my rooms or go out of them without finding one of your aunt's sneaking servants lurking about in the corridor, and I declare that I will not submit to such a degrading system

of espionage. I would rather go and live in the humblest cottage by myself where I should be free than stay here in the midst of all this splendour and be a slave."

Sighing heavily, and feeling as if some ghastly calamity were at hand, I contrived to say—

"Have it as you like, Clare, only don't get yourself the name of a violent woman in this neighbourhood. You had better have Rawson now, or you'll be late for dinner."

"I dislike Rawson quite as much as I did Baines. I'll do without a maid in future, unless I can get Bryan."

Bryan was the old servant who had lived with her mother.

"Can you get her address? Have her by all means if you can get her," I said, feeling that I would agree to anything for peace' sake. So it came to pass that in a very short time Bryan was domiciled with us, and Clare seemed perfectly satisfied.

Once again Christmas came round, and again Paulton came down to stay with us. It was a mild winter, and there was no skating that year, but Paulton, Alice, and I used to scour the country on horseback. Under my auspices Alice had become a very fair horsewoman, and though I should have hesitated to have put her on anything very difficult to deal with, she was well able to take care of herself on a moderately well-behaved horse.

Clare rarely rode with us. She had grown rather languishing and lazy, and preferred driving herself about in the victoria to galloping over rough country roads or jumping over hedges and ditches. But in the evening the honours were all hers, and every man who came to the house coveted a few minutes by the side of the chair on which the sparkling, beautiful young hostess reclined.

She was really sweetly indefatigable in

VOL. I. 9

her efforts to win Paulton to show a more genial spirit towards her, but he still retained that uneasily stiff demeanour which was so unlike his ordinary manner to ladies, and so unlike the ordinary manner of men to Clare.

So at length I thought I must resign myself to the fact that my wife and my friend would never thoroughly get on together, and to make the best of it.

But when Paulton had been with us about a month he astounded us, and not one of us more than the girl herself, by abruptly proposing to Alice St. John.

She accepted him, of course. It would not have been in the course of nature for such a girl to refuse such a man, and I tried to feel thoroughly contented and to take delight in the thought of having him so closely linked to me. At the same time I could not help feeling a trifle disappointed. He ought to have married a lovelier woman

than Alice—a woman more like my own Clare, in fact.

Since Bryan had come to us Clare had been much more even in temper and equable in spirit. I had given a hint to our old servants to the effect that Mrs. Spencer did not like to find them outside her boudoir door so often, and they had said, "Very well—that was as *I* pleased," an ambiguous answer which perplexed me.

Clare was greatly engrossed with some silk embroidery which she had on hand. It was rather a colossal work, consisting of several yards of softly-falling grey-blue satin, which she was covering all over with flowers and leaves in silk. She was a rare embroideress, and the task pleased her and gave her full occupation. Alice had wanted to help her several times, but Clare would have no one's aid but Bryan's.

Accordingly, these two used to be shut up in the boudoir hard at work, while Paulton,

Alice, and I were out hunting or coursing, and dimly and vaguely I felt gratified that Clare was not shut up in the boudoir alone.

That she worked hard there could be no manner of doubt. The flowers and leaves grew like magic, and "It's all the work of one needle," she would say, triumphantly. "Bryan does nothing but just thread the needles and sort the silks."

"Don't work too hard, darling," I would say, for sometimes her face looked strangely worn and haggard when I came home; but she scoffed at the idea of its being hard work, and declared that her needlework was the best amusement she had.

It must not be supposed all this time that Clare was a home-bird. There was seldom an evening when we had not a dinner-party at home, that we did not dine out, or go to a dance or private theatricals in one of the neighbouring country-houses. A favourite in society, flattered by men and

women, sought, loved by my aunt and her sister, and idolised by me. *What was it* that she needed? *What was it* that made her unrestful?

One afternoon I came home between four and five in consequence of my horse having strained a tendon, and so thrown me out of the field. Leaving Alice in charge of Paulton, I got home as well as I could, and on entering the house inquired as usual immediately for my wife.

"Mrs. Spencer is up in the boudoir working," the servant said, and I ran up and tried to open the boudoir door.

It was locked.

Turning rapidly to the dressing-room, I opened that door and went in. There sat Bryan working assiduously at the silk embroidery alone.

As soon as I saw her I knew that I was being tricked and deceived. As soon as she saw me she knew that her connivance with

her mistress's hideous hereditary practice was discovered.

At another moment I was thundering at the locked boudoir door, thunderingly demanding admittance. It was no use; not a sound came from the interior. And then from a tone of command I descended to one of entreaty. But it was all in vain. The door was not opened, and Clare gave me no answer.

In my rage, then I made an effort to burst the door open, but it was of stout oak, and resisted all my efforts, though my strength seemed to be as the strength of ten that day, by reason of the fury and despair that was raging in my heart. I was about to shout for assistance, for at any cost I resolved to gain ingress to that room, when the door was suddenly thrown open and Clare stood before me.

The look of ill-suppressed triumph on her

face enraged me beyond all bounds of discretion, and I was saying—

“The embroidery was a screen then, under cover of which you might pursue the worse than foolish ways of your mother,” when she stopped me with a yell that brought every servant in Glayton Hall to my side in less time than it takes me to write these words.



CHAPTER VIII.

WHAT DID IT MEAN?

“**W**HAT does it mean? Eric! Clare! my children! *what* does it mean?” my poor old aunt cried, as she joined the group, who fell back at her approach, leaving Clare and me clearly outlined.

Clare had recovered her composure, but mine was gone, and has never returned to me since that fell day; nor will it ever now, I fear.

She had subdued all signs of agitation or emotion immediately after giving vent to that heart-deadening cry of hers, and now she was able to speak coolly and coherently.

“You may well ask what it means, Mrs. Westerton. It means that your nephew has gone mad, I should think. After

battering at my door and demanding to be let in, in tones and language that led me to suppose some madman had got into the house, he attempted to burst open the door, and when I threw it open, hoping to escape this strange madman, as I thought him, I found *my husband* ready to assail me with such a volley of invective that, in the extremity of my terror, I shrieked aloud."

"Go down now," my aunt said, gently turning to the servants; "and you can come with me, my dears," she said, laying one hand on Clare's arm and the other on mine.

To my great relief, instead of leading us into the hateful boudoir, she turned into the little study, and then, after kissing us both on the cheek, she left us to "make it up."

As soon as she was gone I said—

"Clare, you have deceived me!"

She made no answer, but turned her head sharply round to listen attentively.

"The embroidery has been a blind. You have professed to be absorbed in it, in order that you may uninterruptedly seclude yourself for the same purpose for which your mother used to seclude herself."

She waited until I paused, and then, without a word, turned and left the room by the door into the boudoir. Presently I heard her go out from that room and enter her dressing-room, when I heard her voice raised in anger against Bryan.

Feeling baffled and uncertain as to what it would be best for me to do in order to break her of a practice which *might* be meaningless and innocent, but which, if persisted in, would effectually mar our married happiness, I resolved to take Paulton entirely into my confidence, and, in spite of the dread I had of hearing him say, "I thought how it would be," or "I told you so," to lay bare my sorrow, and beg him to physic it.

They had ridden far from Glayton that night, and it was consequently very late before Paulton and Alice got back ; so late that the latter had barely time to change her habit for her dress before dinner was announced. She came into the room saying—

“ I hadn’t time to run to your room, Clare—oh ! where is Clare ? ”

Clare had not come down, nor had she sent a message to say she was not coming. I don’t think that I was very much surprised at this, for I had witnessed the wrath of her mood, and deemed it more than likely that she felt rather ashamed of seeing any of us so soon after the recent exhibition. But my aunt looked surprised and annoyed.

“ Eric, you must go up for Clare,” she said to me, distinctly ; and accordingly I ran up, and was stopped by Bryan at the dressing-room.

“ My mistress may get down to the draw-

ing-room by-and-by, sir, but she won't come down to dinner. She's going to have a cup of tea, and a bit of toast up here, quietly."

"Shall I go in?" I asked; and Bryan said—

"Well, no, better not; mistress's head aches."

"Give my love to her, and tell her I shall expect to find her in the drawing-room after dinner," I said, a little tremulously, for I loved Clare still, and could not bear to be at odds with her. I 'longed to take her to my heart, and forgive her all her offences, known and unknown, against me.

I gave them the message downstairs as if coming straight from Clare through me, and my aunt's anxiety being assuaged by my demeanour, the dinner began cheerfully enough.

But suddenly, chilling us to the very centre of our beings, there rushed through the long, lofty room a cold blast, that com-

pelled us to cease from conversation, and then made each one burst out with the question, "What *can* it be?"

As soon as I heard and felt it I remembered its ill-omened presence on two former occasions, and looking across at Paulton, I saw that he remembered too:

"Go and see what doors and windows are open," my aunt said, hurriedly, and I fancied that the servants were glad to get out of the room.

"Every door and window was closed," they said, when they came back, and we, on the strength of this assurance, tried to return to the cheerful tone that had dominated us before we felt it. But this could not be done, and after a few ineffectual efforts to laugh off the effects of that unexpected lull, my aunt and Alice left us.

Then I told Paulton *all* that had happened both near Calais and this day, at home, between Clare and myself, and he was

not ready with any medicine for my soul-sickness.

"Poor old boy," he said, compassionately. "She'll do you, and defy you to the day of your death if she's taken up those tricks already. Alice tells me that Clare has never been quite the same since her mother died, but, of course, she hasn't a suspicion of anything of this sort."

"You won't tell her, will you?" I said, eagerly, and he said—

"No, no; of course not. Keep the matter as dark as you can, and don't thwart her whim—or try to thwart it, rather. I told you how it would be."

"I knew you'd say that," I said, discontentedly, and Paulton replied—

"Well, what is a fellow to say when he hears a thing of this sort? I can't advise you to beat the devil of obstinacy out of her, because you're not a brute; and I can't say lock her up, because she's not mad. All

I can say is, bear it, and bear it quietly, I knew there had been some mischief up when I heard that beastly wind. It warned you before, you know."

"I'm afraid the mischief's not over by any means," I said, dolefully, and Paulton tried to cheer me by saying that probably I should find Clare quite ready to make it up when we went into the drawing-room.

To the drawing-room we presently went, but Clare had not come down yet. I thought I would wait for a few minutes and then go up for her. But I picked up a book, became absorbed in it, and stayed reading till eleven o'clock. Then, recalled to myself by the clock chiming the hour, I sprang up and ran upstairs for Clare.

She was not to be found. The house was searched in vain for her. The gardens and grounds were searched. Grooms were despatched to the nearest railway stations. Everything was done that fervent solici-

tude could do to find her, and everything failed.

But in the morning a gardener found a little note pinned to the laurel-tree at the end of the terrace addressed to me. It ran thus—

“ERIC,—I once told you that if you ever mentioned a certain person and a certain habit of hers to me again, that I should leave you for ever. You have mentioned that person and that habit in terms that leave me *helpless*—yes, *helpless*. I must go : and, if you ever loved me, you may feel some pain in knowing that you have hastened my fate.

CLARE.”

That letter nearly broke my heart ; but still I would not give up the hope of finding her ; and still my friends encouraged me to hope, for they saw it was the only thing on which I lived.

I say I lived on hope ; but what miserable hope it was after all. Merely the hope of

ascertaining what had become of her, for I knew now that she and I could never live together as man and wife again.

At times I stood apart from myself, and pitied myself. It was sad, pitiably sad, to see a young fellow like myself wrecked just as he had been so gloriously launched. As for my poor old aunt, the contemplation of the calamity which had come upon me—the nephew whom she loved as a son—was too much for her, and she went to the “better land” about a year after my ill-starred marriage.

At her death I found myself virtually alone in the world, for though I had plenty of cousins of both sexes, I could not have them to live with me, for divers reasons. The men were one and all too rollicking, and the girls would have been compromised by staying in the house of a man who did not know whether or not he was a widower. As for Paulton, he succeeded to his uncle’s title and

estates, and married Alice, and all went well with him.

Bryan left us soon after her mistress's mysterious departure, and no one knew whither she had gone. The woman wept bitterly when I implored her to tell me what was the ghastly influence that had drawn both mother and daughter to their dreadful dooms. She wept freely, but told me nothing.

All she knew was this—that she had been told by them both that it was essential *to their lives* that they pass a certain portion of every day in absolute, unbroken solitude, and they had employed her to guard their retreat.

“That is all I know, sir,” she said, firmly; and when I said, “But you guess more?” she replied—

“What I guess I'll never tell to human being.”



CHAPTER IX.

A FIRST MEETING—AND A LAST.

MONTHS glided on, and the sharp edges of my sorrow were blunted. I no longer avoided my friends and neighbours as I had at first, when I had been sensitively afraid that they would ask questions, or at any rate say something about the loss that had befallen me, and the manner in which it befell me.

I had fallen completely into the habit of being master of the place, even before my aunt's death, and now that the property was indisputably and irrevocably my own. I had a man's natural desire to send it down to an heir who should also be my son. But though, to all intents and purposes, I was a childless

widower, no one could say whether or not she who had been my wife was dead.

I almost shrank from meeting attractive girls in those days, so great was my dread of losing my heart and winning another's. Therefore for a long time I chiefly frequented the haunts of men, and sedulously avoided any of the social snares that, under the names of balls, picnics, archery, and lawn-tennis clubs are set for free and happy men in the country.

Before proceeding further, I may mention that I had had The Keg pulled down, and the ground on which it stood ploughed up. I would sow no crops there, for I had the feeling that whatever grew there would be unfit food for man. But when it was well turfed over, I had a few fast-growing shrubs planted about it, and gradually that corner of the land came to be a very pretty feature, viewed from the road that ran past the corner of the private lane.

One day I was riding slowly up this lane, thinking sadly of the first day I had entered The Keg, after its occupation by the St. Johns, and of all that had happened since, when I saw a young lady on a high-spirited, handsome pony—a perfect miniature horse—making great efforts to unhasp the gate which separated the lane from the high road.

Riding quickly forward, I opened it for her, and with a bonnie little bow and a smiling “Thank you” she went trotting down the lane towards my own house.

Who could she be? Vainly I asked myself the question. Pretty, blonde, bright as the day, there was no one like her in the whole circle of my acquaintances. I felt strongly impelled by curiosity, or some deeper feeling, to follow her. But prudence forbade, and I rode on trying to forget her.

When I went home an hour or two afterwards, I heard that a young lady called Dalkeith had called with a note from her papa.

Not finding me at home, she had gone in and written another note, which was now handed to me.

Now Dalkeith was the vicar of our parish, but he was a bachelor. He, therefore, couldn't be the papa of the interesting young lady who bore his name. I opened his letter, as I supposed it to be, first, and read—

“DEAR ERIC,—If you have not forgotten the misguided man who took you and several others of your ilk out into the wilderness to read some eight years ago, come over and dine with me at my brother's house this evening at seven. My daughter Daisy takes this over, and will bring your answer back.

“Yours, truly, FRANK DALKEITH.”

I was delighted. Honestly, without any thought of the girl, I was delighted. Yes, it was just eight years ago that Paulton and five or six other young fellows of our own standing had gone down to the Land's End to read under the auspices of Dalkeith, a

famous Civil Service “coach.” Of course I had known all along that he was our vicar’s brother. But until that moment I had not known that he had such a daughter as Daisy.

Then I read the girl’s note—

“DEAR MR. WESTERTON” (I had taken my aunt’s name on her death),—“If I had known it was you at the gate I might have given you papa’s letter then, and perhaps have gone for a ride with you. Do come to-night. Papa wants to see you so much.

“Yours, truly, DAISY DALKEITH.”

I went. I need not describe minutely what followed. I went, and then they came and dined at the Hall: and Daisy, who looked upon herself as little more than a child still, stole my heart out of my keeping before I knew the danger I was in.

But when I awoke to what had happened, I resolved not to trifle with temptation, or to do aught that might in any way be detri-

mental to the sweet child who regarded it as her childish privilege still to be loved by, and loving to, all who came across her path.

I made up my mind to go, and I also made up my mind to tell her father and the vicar why I went. They both knew my miserable story well. They both knew that I had exhausted all known means of discovering the whereabouts, if living, the fate, if dead, of the beautiful bane of my life. And they both pitied me from their hearts.

Frank Dalkeith offered to take his daughter away at once, but I would not hear of his doing this, for he had made arrangements for staying at Glayton for a year in order to assist his brother with some pupils the latter had recently taken. I would not have these arrangements altered, or Daisy's clear mind clouded with suspicion, and so I went away.

I dared not trust myself to see Daisy, after telling my secret to her father and uncle. The girl was always flying over the country

like a bird on her handsome pony, and I trusted to her youth and happiness not to miss me at all. But I learnt afterwards that she was stung into shedding bitter, scalding tears of hurt feeling and disappointment when she found that I had left without bidding her good-by.

How I hated my bonds now—those unseen bonds which could not be grappled with and burst asunder. If I could only have found Clare I would have devoted myself to the cure—or the care—of her diseased mind and soul with all my heart and strength. But I never heard of Clare, and I always thought of Daisy! And my chains galled me, ate into my soul, and corroded it.

It was wretched, too, being away from the Hall, and from the performance of all those duties which had been part of my dear old aunt's inheritance to me. It was unsatisfactory work to go to London and see the men who had been my bachelor compeers

surrounded now by families, happy with their wives and children. My riches had no charm for me, and for a healthy, wealthy man I was, perhaps, as wretched a one as ever existed.

I struggled several times to get myself away out of the country, and at last an effectual but most soul-wearing effort carried me away from the land where Daisy lived to America.

I took letters of introduction with me to wealthy merchants in New York, and in that hospitable city I had soon many homes.

To only a few of my new friends did I compel myself to tell a portion of my sad story. And even to those in whom I did so far confide as to say that I had once gloried in a wife, I refrained from adding how that glory had paled.

But after a time one man, Robert Wyndham by name, an Englishman by birth, but an American by education, habit, and experi-

ence, won upon me so far as to get me to tell him that the wife I had lost might be living still for aught I knew.

“You won’t tell me what your quarrel was about, Westerton?”

“If I told you, you would only look upon me as a madman, who was wearing his soul out for a grief that was not real.”

“Nonsense : it must have been a tangible quarrel enough to have separated you from such a woman as you describe your Clare to have been. Don’t think me merely curious, old fellow. It only occurred to me that if I knew where the shoe pinched I might then better know where to look for the foot it would fit.”

“Your remarks point to the possibility of my seeing her again some day or other,” I said, with an involuntary shudder ; for a vision of Daisy Dalkeith in her joyous, unsullied youth and beauty rose before me as he spoke. A vision of Daisy ! A vision

of purity and peace! While the mere memory of lost Clare was a vision of sin and sorrow.

"So you will see her again, old fellow," he said, seriously. "How and where I can't tell, but I am as firmly convinced that you will see her again as I am that I see you now. You're sceptical by nature, are you not, Westerton? You don't believe in omens or supernatural influences?"

"What are you driving at?" I asked, impatiently, for it seemed to me that he was making an allusion to those mystic dealings with the unseen in which Clare, and her mother before her, had so fatally indulged.

"Well, I'll tell you, and you must scoff or not as you please," he said, frankly. "I am going to be married—*that* I have told you already; but I have not told you that the lady to whom I am engaged is an extraordinarily gifted as well as an extraordinarily

beautiful woman. Among her other natural gifts she counts that of clairvoyance her chiefest."

"Clairvoyance! That has to do with that boshy spiritualism with which you are so imbued over here," I said, contemptuously.

"My dear Westerton, I am not going to argue with you about spiritualism in the abstract," he said, calmly; "but just this special branch of it, clairvoyance, may interest and serve you if you are willing. The lady to whom I am betrothed is a widow, a Mrs. Hill, and she is a private, not a public medium. I was speaking to her last night about a friend—I didn't mention your name—who had 'lost' one who was dear to him. I did not say the lost one was your wife; I did not even say that it was a woman for whom you mourned. But she said at once—'Bring your friend here, and I will go into a trance, and tell

him where the one who is lost may be found.' Will you go?"

"Yes," I assented; "but mind you, I have no faith, and shall not blindly obey directions which I shall regard as ridiculous."

"Wait and hear what Valeric says," he replied. And then we agreed that we would go that same evening.

We reached the hotel at which Mrs. Hill was residing about nine o'clock that night, and heard that the lady was still dining with some of her friends. I thought the fact of her being late for the appointment with us upset Wyndham's equanimity and temper to an unaccountable degree, and put it down to the jealousy of a lover who grudged every moment of the loved one's time that was given to others.

It did not occur to me, till presently I heard him remonstrating with her in the boudoir between the *salon* where I was and the dining-room where she had left her

guests, that he had grudged her the glorious vintage of champagne.

I could not catch the tones of the voice that answered him. They were drawling and muffled, and presently Wyndham came back to me alone, and said—

“Mrs. Hill will go into a trance, as I wish her to do it; but she makes it conditional that you remain here, in this room, while she is in the boudoir; she is not sanguine of success to-night, and altogether—well, altogether, I almost wish I hadn’t brought you.”

I saw that he was vexed and perplexed, and deemed it better to leave matters entirely in his hands, as any suggestions from me might only have embarrassed him.

Presently he lowered the lights in the room in which I was, drew back the intervening curtains, and exposed to my view the dark vista of the boudoir. When my eyes got accustomed to the gloom, I saw

the form of a woman recumbent on the floor, on some heaped-up cushions, but I could neither see her face nor the outline of her figure.

"The spirits are entrancing her very quickly to-night," he whispered. "After all it will be satisfactory, I think. Now, look here, Westerton. When a spirit takes possession of her a voice will speak, but it won't be *her* voice, you understand—it will be the voice, as it sounded in life, of the spirit who has possession of her. You are to answer it, and ask what questions you like."

Before I could answer him, a voice—a man's voice—came from the lips of the recumbent woman. A sonorous, genial voice asked me—

"What can I do for you? I am a doctor. Do you want to know whether you are in sound health or not?"

As he, or she, spoke, the woman rose

from the cushions, flung a veil over her head and face, and approached me to feel my pulse. Almost roughly I resisted her, saying—

“My ills are mental, not bodily.”

“Then what can I do for *you*?” continued the same sonorous, genial voice, as Mrs. Hill turned from me, and laid her fingers lightly on her lover’s wrist.

“Go away, and send a spirit here who can give my friend information about his lost wife, Clare,” Wyndham said, quickly.

And the manly voice said “I will,” quite heartily. And again Mrs. Hill sank upon the cushions.

Presently she appeared to be violently convulsed, and Wyndham whispered to me that she, as the medium, was evidently in opposition to the influence that was controlling her. After a few throes and moans, however, she grew quieter, and more composed, and then, in tones of deadly calm—

in tones that I can never forget—the voice of Clare's mother said to me—

“What do you want to hear? *Why* do you want to know more than you do already?”

Impressed against my will by the earnestness of the voice, and by its appalling similarity to the voice of the mother of the one about whom I wanted to inquire, scepticism vanished, and it was with a fitting amount of faith in there being “something” in this unascertained science of clairvoyance that I answered—

“I want first to hear if Clare, my wife, is still alive?”

There was a pause—a painful struggle between the woman on the cushions and the influence that was in possession of her—and then that same voice replied—

“She is alive. Ask no more.”

“But I will ask more. I ask where she is, what she is doing now, why she dis-

obeyed me, and why she left me when I discovered her disobedience?" I cried, eagerly and excitedly, and the entranced medium moaned as if in dreadful pain.

There was a long pause, and by the dim light I could see that Wyndham began to look nervous and alarmed.

"There is something uncanny about it all to-day," he said, with some agitation. "Shall we shut up, leave off asking questions, and let Valeric come round?"

"No!" I exclaimed, regardless of his evident desire to make an end of it. "You brought me here against my reason, and almost against my will. Now my reason is staggered, for the voice that has been speaking to me is the voice of my lost wife's mother. I must assert my will now, even in opposition to your wishes, and insist upon hearing more."

Then I turned my face towards the doorway into the boudoir through which the

dimly-shadowed-forth form of Mrs. Hill was visible, and repeated, emphatically—

“I ask where Clare is, and what she is doing now? I ask why she disobeyed me in the matter of secluding herself, as her mother did, daily; and why, when she found that I had discovered her treachery to me, she fled, leaving no trace behind her? I ask, and I insist on being answered.”

There was a convulsive throe of the form, a terrible moan from the medium, and then the voice said, slowly—

“Clare is *here*. You can see for yourself what she is doing.”

I started forward with a cry of horror and surprise, but Wyndham forcibly restrained me from approaching closer to Mrs. Hill.

“You may kill her if you disturb her roughly, Westerton. I insist—I command that you retire now. Her agony has been great under this influence; I can see that.

And even to gratify your natural curiosity, she shall not be tortured any more," he said, as sharply as if I had been the one to propose the *séance* in the first place.

"Let me see her!" I entreated. "You heard what that awful voice said—'Clare is here!' Let me see her. Let me be convinced that your love is not the woman I have lost."

"You're a raving lunatic, Westerton," he said, coldly. "As for your seeing Mrs. Hill, I shouldn't think of letting you see her while you are labouring under such an hallucination. She's rather an imperious-natured woman, and if you presumed to connect her in any way with the wife who has left you so very strangely, she might be offended, and visit her wrath upon me."

"But I will see her, I said," determinedly. "No, Wyndham, it's useless for you to try and make me cease from inquiry now. This lady, to whom *you compelled* me to come,

has revealed something to me which I am *compelled* to believe."

"Let me go and speak to her," he interrupted.

He went, and presently came back, looking pained and puzzled.

"Valeric consents to see you on two conditions, Westerton," he said. "She admits to me that this trance into which she fell just now has weakened and shattered her. At the same time she seems to feel that she ought not to have been roused from it when she was. I have told her your name, and given her a rough sketch of the subject of your anxiety."

"And still she consents to see me?"

"Yes; why not?"

"'Pon my word I hardly know," I replied, in some confusion, for, truth to tell, I was beginning to connect Mrs. Hill with my missing wife in a very unauthorised fashion.

“Well, as I tell you, she will see you at once if you like, on two conditions—the first is that I am in the room with you all the time ; the second, that you do not attempt to make her responsible for anything that was said to her by the influence that had possession of her just now.”

“I accept the conditions,” I cried, for I felt sure that if Mrs. Hill and my missing Clare were identical, that I should discover her under any disguise at a glance.

What followed destroyed my belief in my own infallible discernment.

Together with Wyndham, I was presently ushered into the presence of Mrs. Hill, who occupied a seat at the extreme end of the drawing-room from which Wyndham had recently forcibly withdrawn me. There were two lamps burning in the room, but their light was subdued by graceful pink shades, and the seat she occupied was far away from them.

She rose as I entered—a woman of a tall and noble presence, dressed in black velvet, with a rich lace mantilla over her head.

Her face was not the face of Clare—that was my first impression. My next one was that I had met her before.

She fixed me with a glittering glance that made me shiver—tut! what relief. Surely these eyes were black, and Clare's had been of an utterly different hue.

Then she spoke.

“I hear that something in the *séance* which I have just given you has hurt you very much, Mr. Westerton.”

“It has hurt me by the memories it evoked.”

“Ah! how has it?” she said, in commonplace tones. Her voice was unnaturally flat for such a splendidly-made woman.

I thought, “Has it, indeed? Well, my experience is, that the less we give way to

our memories the better for our peace of mind in the present."

Irresistibly impelled to the action, I bent forward and lifted a corner of the lace veil.

"Forgive me," I cried, "but you so forcibly remind me of——"

In a moment Wyndham had caught my arm and thrust me aside, and the lady stood more completely veiled than ever before me. It was in vain I apologised, appealed, was nearly frantic with suspicion and regret.

"Your friend has broken his compact, Mr. Wyndham," she said, in tones that rang in my heart. I knew them so well. They *were* the tones of Clare, now that agitation had caused her to forget to make them flat. "Your friend has broken his compact, and *ours* is, therefore, at an end."

She swept away from the room, and I stayed to endure the wild reproaches of her infuriated and despairing lover.

It was in vain that he attempted to see

her again that night—in vain that he wrote imploring notes, entreating her to forgive him for an offence he had not committed. She was inflexible. And the next morning we learnt that she had gone from New York, and left no clue behind her.

Wyndham and I parted at once, for he felt that I had been the means of his losing a woman he had loved, and I felt that I had saved him from a fatal union with the wife I had lost. Under these circumstances there was no real communion between us.

I came back to England, but, as far as coming back to a home or the companionship of old friends went, I might just as well have gone to Timbuctoo.

I kept away from my own place, and the people of my own county, for fear that I might hear anything of Daisy Dalkeith, which would inflame my already burning desire to see her.

For example, if I had heard that the bright, buoyant-natured girl had grown sad or distrait, I should most likely have attributed the change in her to a desire to see me or to hear something about me, which I should have felt myself to be a heartless brute if I had not fulfilled.

If, on the other hand, I had heard of her as graciously admitting the advances of a new lover, I believe that jealousy would have carried me into her vicinity at once.

Or if praises of her sweet beauty had been sounded in my ears by other men's tongues, what course would have been open to me but to go down and see for myself how intensely she justified the verbal homage?

So, knowing that all my strength was weakness, I kept out of the way of temptation, and tried to drown remembrance and regret in a restless dream of literary and artistic

works that seemed to occupy and, in reality, frittered away all my time.

The worst of it was that I knew all the time that there was no necessity for me to do anything. Fortune had been too good to me in the way of giving me wealth and place. Therefore there was not the hearty incentive to labour which is such a boon to the poor man who is inclined to be lazy, but who, at the same time, prefers work to the workhouse.

Unfortunately, I knew that whether or not I did the work, which was not specially good in itself, my account at my banker's was too good for me to have a single qualm.

Among other things, I dabbled in journalism a good deal, not because either politics or social subjects were of anything like absorbing interest to me, but simply because it threw me into the society of a number of young men who seemed to live

for the day, and to have no memories of the past and no fears for the future.

One of these, a clever young fellow called John Blair—who has, since those days, started a very successful paper of his own—was engaged upon a series of articles on London life, which occasionally led him into very low, and at other times into very high localities.

It happened one night that he had been dining with me when he was going into the “dubious land,” as he called it, and simply out of an idle desire to witness his way of working I volunteered to accompany him.

“I expect you’ll be bored, Eric,” he said to me, as with but languidly-portrayed interest I said—

“Where are we going?”

“I have to hear her some time or other—it’s a lady preacher—and being hard up for a subject for to-morrow’s article I thought I’d stroll in to-night.”

“Where does she harangue—at Exeter Hall?” I asked.

“Oh, no, no! she’s not up to that mark. She’s a Methodist, I suppose, something after the pattern of Dinah, the pretty preacher in ‘Adam Bede,’ probably. Many are a good deal exercised about her, for she has good looks and eloquence.”

“She’s not after the pattern of that American woman who advocated free-love and all its iniquities, is she?” I asked; and he answered carelessly, having evidently thought very little about her—

“No, I believe the morality of what she says is all right; anyway, we’ll go and hear her, and if she is a humbug I’ll expose her in my article to-morrow.”

We made our way to a large room in a house somewhere near Tottenham-court-road, and found ourselves among the first to arrive. Gradually the room filled, and when it was closely packed the gas was

turned up, and revealed a dais at the end covered with black cloth. The traditional lecturer's table stood on the platform, but this, unlike any lecturer's table I had ever seen before, was covered with black velvet, and on it, instead of the usual water-bottle and glass, there stood a small round mirror on an antique brass upright stand.

In another moment the black curtains at the back of the dais were slowly parted, and a woman dressed in flame-coloured velvet came forward, her arms crossed over her bosom, her head bent downwards, and took her place in front of us all.

I was almost sure of her before she opened her lips, but as soon as she spoke her first words I knew that it was Clare.

I was in the shadow of a pillar, and I knew that I was safely secured from her observation; but I am sure that the uneasiness which almost instantly manifested

itself in her manner was due to my presence in the room.

She looked strangely, weirdly beautiful in her glowing flame-coloured dress among her black surroundings ; but my heart and soul revolted against her more and more with every word she uttered.

The doctrine she preached was a strange and unhallowed one, but it excited many among the audience to tears, and groans, and lamentations.

A great deal of her language was mystical, and much of her meaning was obscure, but I continued to gather enough from it to know that she meant us to understand that if we embraced her faith and followed her advice we should become well acquainted with the secret of what we call death, and fathom all the mysteries of the unseen world, into which, eventually, we should be called upon to pass. She told us that the souls of " the departed who had

adhered to the idle and superstitious forms of accepted creeds went into a lower sphere and animated the bodies of lower animals." She raved of being herself the "dual-being," at divers times, of some of the most glorious women of antiquity, and finally declared that her "star-circle had elevated her to the position of being the occasional abiding-place of Annie Boleyn and her great daughter Elizabeth." Then becoming hysterical—or as I felt it to be—demoniacal, she raved out denunciations against dynasties, principalities, and powers, and finally fell on the floor in strong convulsions under the impression that she was "possessed" by spirits of Henry VIII., Annie Boleyn, and Jane Seymour, and that the two latter were wrestling fiercely within her for the very dangerous honour of their dangerous lord's preference.

Two or three attendants came and carried her off, and one of them announced

that the "*séance* was over for this evening." With the utterance of these words I became convinced that I had been present at one of the maddest of so-called "spiritualistic" orgies, and also that Clare was quite mad enough to justify me in incarcerating her in a lunatic asylum. At the same time I realised that unless I was exceedingly careful she was quite sane enough to defeat me in the attempt to preserve the public from more of her damaging exhortations.

Altogether my mind was in a whirl as I followed John Blair out into the open air, resolving to take him into my confidence.

I began by saying, "She must be mad!"

"Or bad beyond redemption," he said. "Let's get away, Eric. There is something sulphurous about the atmosphere. Let us get away."

He was hurrying on, but I checked him, and said—

“Let me get her address first. I must do that.”

As I turned to go back into the hall she came out and sprang into a cab, and involuntarily I pressed closer to get a clear view of her face.

As I did so she leant forward, throwing back the black lace hood which half enveloped her, and said, eagerly—

“You *are* here; I knew it though. Are you with me, or against me?”

She put her hand out, clutched mine between her burning fingers, and seemed to be drawing me into the cab; but I struggled free of her, as of a night-mare, and with a sharp cry of “Drive on,” she passed out of my sight before I recovered the faint feeling which had come over me at her touch.

When I grew quite conscious and clear again, I found a crowd round me, with young Blair in their midst anxiously giving

directions about me. I got up and walked away, feeling dazed and disgraced ; but still before I slept that night I constrained myself to tell him the whole of my story.

His advice was that I should not endeavour to find her out ; but I did not act upon it, and for weeks after this my one weary work was to find her.

It never occurred to me to think that if I found her she might persuade me to take her back, and reinstate her in her former honours and position. But I think this fear was much in John Blair's mind, for he never cordially aided me in my efforts.

* * * * *

One night, in walking home from the Princess's Theatre to the Charing Cross Hotel, where I was staying, I heard the cry of "Fire!" raised, and was presently passed, at that gallant gallop of theirs, by an engine and company of men of the Fire Brigade. Something in the air of splendid

courage with which they were rushing on at full speed to danger attracted me, and I jumped into a hansom, directing it to follow them sharply.

The scene of the fire was one of those old-fashioned, handsomely-built and spacious houses in the region of Soho—once tenanted by people of wealth and position, now largely employed as lodging-houses for humbler folk. The flames were soon put out, and the firemen were swarming up and down the ladders like cats, lugging fainting and half-suffocated women and children down in safety in a way that was as grand as it was indescribable. One brought down a poor, half-insensible creature close by me, and when he laid her gently on some blankets by my side, I saw it was Clare.

She breathed her last faint gasp as I bent over her helpless form ; and, seeing what a wreck she had become, and remembering what storms she had passed through

since her mother's death, and knowing how good God is, I felt that it was better so.

I wrote to Dalkeith, telling him what had happened, and bidding him tell his daughter—exactly as much as he thought fit to tell her.

“But,” I added, “though I leave so much to your discretion, I tell you this for your guidance: in six months I shall ask Daisy to be my wife.”

I did so, and Daisy and I are very happy. Very happy, though at times my spirit faints within me at the recollection of what has been. And though, from the hour of my New York experience, I have been satisfied in a measure as to the causes of much that seemed altogether inexplicable before, I cannot attempt to give a clearer explanation of those occurrences than this—

Namely, that both Clare and her mother were clairvoyant mediums, and that they were so to a degree that was beyond their

own control. It may be presumed that the shock of being roused from a trance by her daughter killed Mrs. St. John, and that the shock of her mother's death intensified Clare's gift—or curse!

I can say no more.



HER ANTECEDENTS.

CHAPTER I.

SHE CAME.

WHO could possibly think well of a woman who came into our intensely respectable, well-born and authenticated but rather impecunious midst, with a Victoria! a seal-skin jacket, trimmed with sable tails! a fringe on her forehead! and no introductions? A fringe had been the evil thing at which we good people of Bakenham had drawn the line. A fringe had been the crucial test which we had applied to every lady stranger who came within our borders for the last six months, during which it and its moral influence upon the female popula-

tion, had been largely discussed by the Society Journals. And now 'she' came, taking the best house in Bakenham, and one that stands at the end of the street nearest to the church, surrounded by a pretty garden, and a high ivy-covered red brick wall.

The Victoria created a feeling against her from the first. Mrs. Langdale the squire's wife, had her portly person conveyed about the country in a heavy, big, old family coach, and the Miss Wesleys took their daily airing in a covered car of an unpretentious description. The doctor, Mr. Sykes, who had a fine practice, and an equally fine family, did his rounds in a hooded phaëton on wet days, and in a smart dog-cart in fine weather. Two or three other people, chiefly widows and maiden ladies on incomes ranging from four to six-hundred a year, drove little Shetland or Exmoor ponies in basket-carriages. But Baken-

ham had drawn the line at Victorias, as it had at fringes, until she came !

It was such a perfectly-appointed Victoria too, a harmony in olive-green, outside and inside of one tint, with nothing to relieve its panels but the monogram, which was after a time discovered to be V. H. L. The coachman wore olive-green livery too, and the horses were handsome dark chestnuts. If she could have got 'olive-green' horses, I believe she would have had them, her love of harmony was so great.

The house she had taken belonged to Mr. Wesley, the only brother of those Miss Wesleys of whom mention has been made. He was a great power in Bakenham, not that he ever did anything very definitely good for the place, for he lived in rather a parsimonious way, in a huge house, and was grudgingly 'just,' and nothing more, to those whom he was compelled to employ. But his name carried great weight at all the town

meetings, and his modest allusions to his ancestor and namesake, John Wesley, the great Reformer, were always welcome and appreciated, however out of place they might be.

He and his family owned a great deal of land and house property about Bakenham, though he was not our squire; and though the living was not in his gift, he had been the means of getting it for my husband. Therefore I owed him a debt of gratitude, and so bore more gently with his hard, Puritanic, self-sufficient spirit than I might have done had I not regarded him in the light of a benefactor. .

I happened to be the recipient of his first expressions of annoyance about his new tenant at the High Street House. He came up to the rectory one morning late in October, with the air about him that I knew so well, the air of being cognizant of something wrong, which he could not quite determine how to right.

"Is Prendergast at home? I want to consult him on a matter of great importance," he said to me, as I went through the open French window to meet him.

"He is out in the parish. Shall I do as well?" I asked, for Mr. Wesley had the habit of coming to consult my husband on subjects of great importance every day or two, and my husband had the habit of turning over the discussion of these subjects to me.

"Perhaps you will," he said, regarding me critically; "perhaps your sex will enable you to be a better adviser for me in this matter even than your husband would be. You know I've let the High Street House?"

"Yes, I have heard so."

"Well my dear Mrs. Prendergast, I fear I have made a terrible mistake; my sisters saw my new tenant arrive yesterday in a Victoria, and this morning they saw her out walking with her hair all ruffled over her forehead, 'a fringe,' they call it; they say

I must take some steps, they feel it to be only due to the memory of the great Reformer that I, who bear his name, should protest against and put down anything like vain and sinful frivolity in those over whom I have authority."

"But *have* you any authority over this lady?" I ventured to ask.

"It is that very knotty point that I have come to discuss with Prendergast; if *he*, on my behalf, will call and remonstrate with Miss Lee."

"Indeed, indeed he won't do that," I interrupted laughing; "my husband cannot go and ask a lady to put down her Victoria, and put back her hair, simply because your sisters dislike her special style of carriage and *coiffure*: surely such a subject is beneath you altogether, Mr. Wesley! But tell me about our new neighbour, is she young, middle-aged, or old? widow, or old maid? tell me all about her."

"She is a Miss Hope-Lee, that is all I know, and from what my sisters tell me I have been guilty of very great indiscretion in accepting her as my tenant," he said sourly, for he was baffled and annoyed by my refusal to influence my husband to interfere on the petty point that was exercising the spirits of Mr. Wesley and his sisters. I have said that I carried about with me a lively recollection of the benefit he had conferred on us by getting the living for my husband. But *he* never forgot it for a moment, and when either of us opposed him, or found it impossible to applaud him, he invariably assumed an air of sour dissatisfaction that was as irritating as it was unreasonable.

"I thing that your sisters are premature in pronouncing such a judgment on a stranger," I said, for the arrogance of the estimable Miss Wesleys was one of the things that prevented Bakenham being an

earthly paradise. Then, I added, that it was my intention to call on Miss Hope-Lee in a few days, for that I rejoiced in the advent of anyone so unlike the prevailing type of dull, decorous womanhood in Bakenham.

He shook his head grimly and went away, and standing there by my window, I saw him turn from our gate towards his sisters' house, there to find fresh food for doubts about and complaint against Miss Hope-Lee.

He was not a man of strong character, but he was full of strong prejudices, and these his sisters fostered, with all the ill-natured skill of which they were possessed. They assumed it as their right to pitch the moral key in Bakenham, and as they flattered her and saw much beauty and goodness in all that she said and did, Mrs. Langley suffered them to rank with herself socially, and never showed a benign countenance to any one in whom 'those dear good souls the Wesleys' found flaws.

"If they have made a set against her, poor Miss Hope-Lee will not get much good out of a residence in Bakenham," I said to myself, and without knowing anything about her I pitied her for having come among such a tribe of savage-natured professing Christians.

"I met Wesley's new tenant in the Mill lane, stepping along in style with a fine mastiff by her side," my husband said, when he came in, and we sat down to luncheon.

"Yes, what is she like?" I asked, reserving my description of Mr. Wesley's visit and alarm until I had heard Arthur's verdict.

"Like! like a very pretty, modest, light-hearted young lady," he returned. "I raised my hat to her as I passed, and she responded with a little gracious bow and smile that was as well-bred as it was unaffected."

"You go and call on her as soon as you can, Edith," my husband commanded, "and then if you find her all right, give those poor prating old women to understand that I shall be very angry if they run about jabbering about her, and creating a feeling against her; such a reception may turn her from the quiet safe path and induce her to take to more dangerous ones, where she will be better appreciated; more women are driven to evil by women, than are led to it by men."

"You speak as if you knew something of her, Arthur?" I said inquiringly, and he replied—

"I read a good deal about her in her face before she noticed me, and brightened into graciousness; there is the shadow of an unforgotten sorrow, or an expiated sin hanging over her fair brow; she has come here for rest and safety I feel sure, and, God willing, she shall find both."

And I knew when he said that, that my husband was preparing himself to be a real friend to the stranger, and to sustain unflinchingly a good deal of annoyance on her account.

That same afternoon I went down and called upon the new occupant of the High Street House.

The whole interior of the house was metamorphosed out of my knowledge. The large square hall, which had, under the rule of former inhabitants been a chilly dreary passage-room merely, was now made into a handsome cordial warm-looking reception chamber, comfortably, luxuriously even, furnished with rugs and divan-like couches with convenient oak tables with drawers in them, and writing-slopes upon them, with big blue vases and rose bushes and fuchsias in Majolica pots. On the wall glittering brass shields and huge embossed dishes hung, and the doors were draped with

richly-textured curtains of yellowish brown. I could not refrain from uttering an exclamation of surprise and delight as I stepped over the threshold and marked the change, and I looked forward with more curiosity and interest than I had felt before, to a meeting with the stranger.

“Miss Hope-Lee was at home, and would be with me shortly,” the servant said as he held open the drawing-room door, and I passed in and found myself in a room that was entirely different to anything Bakenham had ever seen before.

It was a long, low room, with a deep bay window filling up the whole of one end, and opening to the terrace. The furniture was all very dark, and subdued in tint, being of that greenish blue velvet which blends so happily with ebony, and black teak wood. There was not a line of gilding in the room, the mirrors were framed deeply with the same velvet, the doors were panelled with

it. The only bit of colour that caught the eye was a group of red roses in a vase on the table in the corner. The room in fact was perfect, in exquisite taste, but to my uneducated eye it did appear a little gloomy.

Presently the lady whom I had come to see entered the room, holding the handle of the door in her hand, and leaning back against it with a wonderful grace of gesture that I have never seen equalled while she quietly surveyed me. I could not help watching her every action and expression as if she had been the heroine of a play, and the room a scene at a theatre.

As she stood there, resting easily while she made a brief study of my personal appearance, and came to conclusions about me, I regarded her intently, and this is what I saw.

She had a tall, very supple, slender figure, and her head rose with a most fascinating

grace, from rather square, but most shapely shoulders. Her hair was very fair and bright, and it grew with the elastic wave that belongs by right to childhood over her pretty low brow. Her little white mobile face was held up to precisely the angle at which it looked its loveliest. Searching as was the gaze of her blue eyes, there was a pathetic expression in them that made me forget the consummate art of her *posé* in admiration and something like tender pity. Because her mode of entering the room was unconventional and unlike anything I had ever seen before, I fell into the error of imagining it to be unaffected and unpremeditated.

“I have come to welcome you among us rather sooner than I ought to have done perhaps, Miss Hope-Lee,” I began, “but you must please to attribute the premature visit to the right motive, a desire to make you feel at home, and one of us in Bakenham.”

She relinquished the door handle and came forward then, with an eager affectionate expression in the movement of her pretty hands that was eminently touching. Then she thanked me in clear, thrilling tones for "my great kindness in giving such a greeting to a stranger," and I fell a blind and enslaved victim to the further fascination of her tones.

There was something positively bewitching to me in the way in which she would drop into a crouching position on a fender stool, and the next minute restlessly (but gracefully always) perch on the arm of a chair or the end of a table. She was so artless I told myself, everything she did was so unstudied, and all the while she was graceful and pretty.

But artless and guileless as she was, she managed to baffle my curiosity most thoroughly on the occasion of this my first visit. I really did not desire to 'find out.

anything about her, but I felt a little sorry that so sweet and trustful looking a young woman should be so guarded and cautious, when I asked her—

“Where had she been living previously?”

“In many places,” she said, “I am fond of travelling, and like change of society.”

“Then I am afraid we shall not keep you at Bakenham long; we are very quiet people here, and there is very little society, and what there is is rather dull,” I said honestly.

“I was told that it was a good neighbourhood; the agent from whom I took this house assured me that there were a good number of county families within visiting distance of the town; *those* are the people I want to know, not the townspeople of Bakenham.”

Her voice was a semitone sharper as she said this, and her manner less artless but more natural perhaps. Still, though I

appreciated the full absurdity of her speech and hopes, I attributed the delusion under which she laboured to her ingenuous ignorance of the ways of the great world.

“The neighbourhood is pleasant enough, if you know the pleasant people,” I laughed. And then I could not help adding—“But for a young, pretty, wealthy woman I should have thought London offered many more attractions.”

“It has not one for me, not one!” she said decisively, and I saw that it was by an effort that she subdued a sort of nervous irritability that was altogether out of proportion to the offence I had offered her in suggesting London and its delights.

“When I was your age it had many more for me than Bakenham will ever hold, but I am glad you differ with me, we are the more likely to keep you,” I said heartily; and then I went on to say that

I hoped she would take an interest in our local amusements.

"Do you have many things going on here?" she asked.

And I told her "Yes, concerts and dramatic recitations found great favour in Bakenham."

"I have no affection for either," she said, shrugging her shoulders with the air of one who dismisses an intensely tedious subject, "the form of amusement for which I came here is not I assure you anything that I could get put before me better in London: but I think I shall like archery meetings if they're well patronised and supported, and I shall like regular country-house visiting among people who keep the ball rolling. *You* know the sort of thing I mean."

She watched me so keenly as she spoke, seeking to discover in my face if I followed her *avowed* meaning accurately that I had no manner of difficulty in reading the real

one, which she believed herself to be concealing. Her notions of 'country-house visiting' were not gained from personal experience I felt sure. At the same moment I arrived at the conclusion that things were not quite what they seemed about her altogether. That she was a clever woman 'on promotion,' or to use the social slang of the day 'on the make,' and that beautiful graceful and talented (in a way) as she undoubtedly was, that she was educating herself at present to seem at home among her refined and beautiful surroundings.

At the same time though I clearly discerned all these things about her, I liked the prospect of having Miss Hope-Lee for a neighbour, and of becoming well acquainted with her. I liked the idea of watching the little tussle for supremacy in Bakenham which she would assuredly have with the Miss Wesleys. And as in a glass darkly, I saw a vision of the way that

apparently untutored charm of hers would tame the lion of narrow social and religious prejudice in Mr. Wesley's breast.

"For he is but a man, after all," I argued with myself, as I watched some of the well-studied attitudes of abandonment to ease into which the lissom-figured young lady fell, and felt myself charmed by the smile which though sweet and bright was not quite true, that played now and again over her wide well-formed flexible mouth.

"What do you think of her?" my husband said to me when we met at dinner that night, and I being determined that she should make her graceful way among us all unaided, replied—

"She knows she is attractive, and she knows how to set her attractions off to the greatest advantage; when a woman has that knowledge it matters little what else she lacks in this narrow-minded world, which is so apt to judge by appearances."

“But in some respects appearances are against this lady I am told,” he said, “they tell me that she is too young and pretty to be living by herself without a chaperone.”

“If she gets a hint of that kind, she will invent a mother, and have us all up for libel,” I said, laughingly, and then I added, “I am sure she has made up her mind to gain a certain goal, and the road she has to traverse to meet it is unknown land to her; I want to see her making tracks across it without a guide, not because I think she has unerring instincts, and will do the right thing by intuition, though she may be absolutely ignorant of what the ‘right thing’ is, and of how it should be done.”

Then I went on to tell him a little about the taste displayed in the adornment of the house, and a little more about that skilled dramatic power of hers, which concealed the art by which she had impressed her graceful individuality upon me. And

we agreed that whatever might be the antecedents of Miss Hope-Lee she was undoubtedly our most interesting parish-ioner.

“There *may* be no harm in her, but it’s odd that a young lady who can keep up such an establishment as she has started should have no female relation to countenance and support her,” Miss Wesley said, in reply to a remark made by my husband to the effect that, “it could hardly be looked upon as a fault of hers that her father and mother were dead, and that she was an orphan.”

“Perhaps not a ‘fault’, but most certainly a very serious misfortune,” Miss Wesley granted severely, and her brother backed her up by quoting the example of a house-maid of his own, whom he had charitably taken into his service from the Foundling Hospital, and who had rewarded his trust and confidence by breaking a quantity of

valuable glass and stealing some of his silver.

“I always like to know people’s parents before I accept people as my friends,” Miss Wesley said, with the air of one who felt the world would never wag respectably until her views were more widely adopted, and then Mrs. Langdale (whose life was a dull one in spite of her local grandeur) remarked that “At least Miss Hope-Lee’s parents must have been people of property, or they could not have left their unmarried daughter so amply provided for as she appeared to be.”

“In justice to her, I must mention that she has offered to pay the three years’ rent in advance,” Mr. Wesley said, with an evidently anxious desire not to be outdone in generosity towards the stranger by the squire’s wife.

“And have you accepted the offer?” my husband asked.

“The lady made a point of my doing it,” Mr. Wesley answered, and my husband went on—

“Then I think the least you can do is to acquit this lady of fraudulent intentions, and what do you say? shall we bear in mind that our own fathers and mothers have gone to the Better Land, before we condemn her for having lost hers?”

“If she only had an aunt living with her,” Miss Wesley urged.

“No, no ; please God, the prettiest woman in the place will find the best guide, philosopher, and friend a woman can have, a good husband soon,” Mr. Prendergast said, cheerily.



CHAPTER II.

HOW TO SECURE POSITION.

I HAVE gone through several phases of feeling about her since these days of which I am writing, but I can recall now vividly, and in all its intensity, the sensation of supreme satisfaction and admiration I felt for that artificial realism of hers, when Miss Hope-Lee bore down upon me early one morning with the announcement that—

“It was a great nuisance to her, but she had an invitation to a dinner that day week, from the Langdales, and she supposed she would be considered *gauche* if she didn’t go.”

“Not *gauche*, simply foolish, as you have avowedly come down here to try and get into that sort of society,” I said calmly.

"Who says that I want it? Who knows that I wanted it? After all I am indifferent about all these tedious, stuck-up, insular-minded people," she replied, her voice full of trembling pathetic inflexions, her face pale with fury (I tried to think of it as "wounded feeling," but in my heart I knew it was "fury") as she spoke.

"I know that you wanted it, that you want it still, and that you are not at all indifferent to the people however tedious they may be," I replied, and then she stamped her pretty foot at me with fascinating violence and went into an effective simulated rage that delighted me more than ever with her as a study.

"But the Langdales!—the Langdales don't have charades at Christmas and lawn-meets in the hunting season, and get every one and everything that is delightful to their house, regardless of expense, do they?" she asked, eagerly.

“Even if they haven’t done so already, they’re amending their ways; they have asked *you*!” I replied.

She turned away from me with genuine impatience, and her wide, flexible, clever mouth forgot to smile as she said—

“They have asked *me*? it required no prophet to tell me they would do that much; but whom am I asked to meet? I can have ‘myself’ at home, in my pretty home, where I can watch myself in a dozen moods on each night in my big mirrors; but how shall I feel in the Langdale’s house, when, if I don’t conduct myself with the correct inelegance of the Miss Wesleys and others of that ilk, I shall be regarded as mad, bad, and dangerous to know.”

“Conduct yourself with correctness, and as we say to the children, you will see what you will see,” I replied coldly, for I wanted her to understand that it was a more gracious thing on Mrs. Langdale’s part to have invited

her than it was on hers to have accepted the invitation.

“Conduct myself with correctness ! Oh ! Mrs. Prendergast that’s delicious, just show me how Mrs. Langdale *thinks* people conduct themselves who really belong to the society she aims at, and I’ll give her an illustration that shall be a thing for her to quote and fall back upon for the rest of her life. *I will show her how to play la grande dame.*”

“*She will act the reality to you, you need not trouble yourself to put a falsely conceived presentment of the character before her,*” I interrupted, chillingly again, for I did not want to see my fascinating young friend stumble on the threshold of Bakenham Society. I could see that Miss Hope-Lee had grandly-proportioned ‘views’ as to what constituted ‘good society,’ but as to experience of it ! Heaven help the misguided young woman ; a school-girl whose parents had graduated in it, could have taught her.

There was her error—her ‘misfortune’ rather, from the first! she was not to the manner born, but she had the trick of seeming! I tried this day to win something like social confidence from her, asked her what kind of dinner parties she liked, and endeavoured to find out if she had ever been to a private one where there were other ladies, in her life. From one or two remarks which she inadvertently let fall, I gathered that she had often dined with men of rank and position, that all the luxuries and elegancies of the dinner-table were familiar to her, but that she was steeped in ignorance of the most-noble of precedence among other things.

“I suppose Mr. Langdale will take me in to dinner?” she said naïvely.

“My dear girl, you forget that there will be married women there!” I said, giving her an opportunity of retrieving her position, and blotting out her blunder. But she did not take the hint.

"But I am the stranger, and certainly am in a better position than any of the Bakenham ladies," she urged, "I live in as good a style as the Langdales themselves, now don't I, and keep a carriage?"

"Little Mrs. Barlow the curate's wife will walk out before you," I laughed, "and that reminds me that I have to scold you for remissness; you have not returned her call she tells me; we are very punctilious people here in Bakenham, and you will stand accused of being ignorant of what is etiquette, if you make these mistakes."

"Mrs. Barlow told me herself they were as poor as church mice, and couldn't afford to give their friends anything better than weak tea and bread-and-butter," she said, in an explanatory tone.

"And what of that?" I asked.

"Well, Mrs. Prendergast, this of it! I didn't come down to Bakenham for the sake of knowing such people."

“ Did you not, indeed? perhaps you are wise to be humble; Mrs. Barlow is the granddaughter of one of our oldest Scotch peers, and her father is a baronet, and a man high up in the navy,” I said quietly, and Miss Hope-Lee rose into one of her most strikingly elegant and original standing attitudes, and said, protruding her pretty pointed chin and smiling ingenuously—

“ Good-bye; when I hear of people dragging their ancestors to the fore on all occasions I generally find that they have no claims of their own to consideration. Mrs. Barlow struck me as being rather *brusque*, but I’ve no doubt she will improve on acquaintance; what is her grandfather’s title? I didn’t quite catch it.”

“ Because I did not quite mean you to do so,” I laughed, and she went away with an amusing expression of being baffled upon her pretty face. But she went straight from me to Mrs. Barlow, and made herself wonder-

fully attractive to that lady. So much so, indeed, that Mrs. Barlow told me afterwards that "the girl had most subtly delicate perceptions."

"Of course it's impossible that she can know anything about me," Mrs. Barlow said, "but her whole manner was charged with the most considerate recognition of my social claims in spite of my present poverty."

"I am glad to hear it," I replied, and I did not think it necessary to tell Mrs. Barlow that I had counselled our diplomatic friend to her present course. For though by her own frank confession Mrs. Barlow was one of the poorest of our *coterie*, she was by right of birth and breeding one of our most powerful members, and she had a wholesome scorn of aught that savoured of time-serving and double-dealing, and a wholesome frank way of expressing the same. I think that had she known that it was my mention of the magic mixture of glory she derived from her

grandfather the earl, and her father the baronet which brought Miss Hope-Lee to her portals, that she would have given that young lady reason to think her rather *brusque* for some time to come. But as I held my tongue on the subject I had the satisfaction of feeling that Miss Hope-Lee had gained another ally in Bakenham.

When I went into the Langdale's drawing-room on the night of their dinner-party I found a goodly company assembled. Representatives of the best families from several miles round were there, together with the *élite* of Bakenham, among whom of course were the Wesleys. Miss Hope-Lee was the last to arrive, soft white *tulle* billowing round about her throat, and a creamy white satin train spreading itself behind her and following every turn and twist of her lissom figure.

She came in with the little chin held out like a pouting child's, and the blue, flickering eyes looking wistful as usual. Came in with

a sweet thrilling toned apology for being the last, and a pathetic little account of her dear dog's foot having been grazed by the carriage wheel just as she was starting. In a moment she had her audience. Every one crowded round to look at her, and to hear the tale she told, and the born actress kindled to the occasion, and warmed to her work.

I saw Mr. Wesley push into the throng that surrounded her, and I saw his look of shame-faced satisfaction when Mrs. Langdale requested him to take his lovely tenant in to dinner. Something told me that he was a marked man from that moment, for though Miss Hope-Lee kept her pretty head uplifted at the most becoming angle, and affected to be more engrossed by her own narrative of the evil that had befallen her mastiff than she was in reality, she was, I could perceive, taking in and fully comprehending every mark of the local estimation in which Mr. Wesley was held.

While as for him ! he would surrender without discretion, of that I felt morally sure.

But after we were rejoined by the men, who never sat long at Langdale's table, she gave quite another lead, and flashed into such animation as bewildered and charmed us all. There were two or three local celebrities present, who 'sang as well as any one on the boards,' we told one another in Bakenham, but these piped and trilled in vain that night when once Hope-Lee's pathetically tremulous tones had been let free with all their dramatic force upon us.

Not that she disputed the sovereignty of song with the local Pattis and Antoinette Sterlings. But she gave the balcony scene from *Romeo and Juliet*, and the trial scene from *The Merchant of Venice*, and then thrilled out a bit of *The May Queen*, in a way that made me marvel about her more than ever.

"She pronounces so very perfectly that I

feel sure she has been a governess," one of the Miss Wesleys whispered to me inquiringly, and for certain reasons I felt glad for my clever favourite's sake that the obtuse old lady was guessing so wide of the mark.

"Governess or not, she can give us all lessons in the arts of reading and speaking," I replied, and just then she came over, and lent down towards me whispering—

"Have I done wrong?"

"You have done quite right, and proclaimed your former calling very prettily to those who can understand the proclamation," I replied, and then I took her hand and guided her into the seat by my side, and said—

"My dear why have you made concealment of the fact of having been an actress?" I said to her gently, and she withdrew her hand from mine almost fiercely as she asked—

"Who says that I have been one?" then

with a sudden change from threatening to tenderness she, added—

“If you *can* believe me, believe that I would glory more in being a famous actress than in anything else on earth: but never hint to any of these people that I have had such an ambition, and never try to account for me in any way, will you? I get frightened, nervous, beyond myself when people seem to be trying to place me in the past. I want to start from now, I want to have rest and happiness—Oh! what *have* you led me on to say to you?”

“Nothing dangerous, nothing that you would not repeat at any given moment,” I said, laying my hand soothingly on hers again, but she trembled visibly, and I felt that the kindest thing I could do for her just then, was to divert observation from her as much as possible. Accordingly I suggested that the youngest Miss Wesley should sing us one of her well-known ballads,

knowing perfectly well that her rendering of "Won't you tell me why, Robin?" would exercise everybody's spirit so painfully that they would one and all be absorbed in their courteous endeavours not to show how sadly tried they were. But my amiable *ruse* failed. Mr. Wesley was so accustomed to his sister's strains that he could listen to them unflinchingly, indeed he disregarded them altogether, I believe, and concentrated all his attention on his fair young tenant, from whom he had until this evening so sedulously held aloof.

But all my fears and frettings were of no avail in checking the march of events. In less than a month after that fatal dinner Miss Wesley came to me one morning with something akin to despair in her face and voice, and told me that her brother had that day announced to them that he was going to marry Miss Hope-Lee.

Then I risked being regarded as an in-

~~_____~~ _____ to the
~~_____~~ _____ her to
~~_____~~ _____ was con-
~~_____~~ _____ to the end
~~_____~~ _____ from couch
~~_____~~ _____ in my
~~_____~~ _____ situations

... in my ~~own~~ defense
... in my ~~own~~ improvement
... in my ~~own~~ mind you don't
... in my ~~own~~ you are under-

U.S. F. MARINE, ~~REDACTED~~ INC.

● 2010 年 10 月 1 日起

● 注意

[illegible]

... Mr

24

1. *Chlorophyll a* (Chl a) and *Chlorophyll b* (Chl b) are the primary photosynthetic pigments in green plants. They are responsible for capturing light energy and converting it into chemical energy through the process of photosynthesis. Chl a is the most abundant pigment, while Chl b is present in smaller amounts. Both pigments are found in the chloroplasts of green plants.

it will do me good and make me happier to have to consider him and his friends and relations at every turn. I shall make myself a new person, and I will treat everything connected with them as being of such importance that I shall become an important person myself in the family and neighbourhood."

"And that is the low aim to which you are ready to sacrifice your youth, beauty, and heart?"

"They have all been sacrificed long ago," she replied.

"And you will reap nothing but disappointment," I went on, taking no notice of her desolate speech, "he is not a great man, you won't gain a very grand

usly.

to deter me and

his wife I shall

no one will dare

to question who I am or where I came from."

"His sisters are questioning it already," I said; "dear Vere, tell this foolish old man that you were mad to say 'yes' to his most foolish heart; I'll tell him if you don't like to."

"No, no, no," she interrupted, "let it go on, let me feel safe and be safe; I will be a good true wife to Mr. Wesley, I will indeed, and Mrs. Prendergast, don't think that there is anything about my own life that makes me unfit to be a gentleman's wife. Oh! what am I saying? Why am I pleading with you?"

"Because you know you are doing wrong, Vere, and you're vainly trying to justify yourself with me," I said, as sternly as I could; but it was hard work to be sensible and stern with that pretty creature, even when her own supreme folly forced me to be so.

"I tell you I am doing *right*," she said, mournfully. Then she added, passionately, "You don't know what it is to feel quite alone and unprotected, and at the mercy of any one who hates you and has the power to injure you."

"Tell me your story. You have one, I'm sure, and perhaps I may be as useful to you as you fancy Mr. Wesley may be," I said, impulsively; but her confiding mood had passed away, and she declared, almost petulantly, that she 'had no story, and that her nervousness and morbid fears were entirely due to the fact of her having lived so much alone.

From that day to the day of her marriage, I never got an opportunity of seeing her alone. She was always either absorbed in the preparations for her marriage, in which case her maid was with her, or she secured herself from inquiries on my part by meeting me in the sheltering presence of Mr. Wesley.

I was pleased and surprised at one thing, and that was the way in which she contrived to overcome the prejudices which the Miss Wesleys had felt against her from the first. Without in any way sacrificing her own independence, or being at all abject to them, she softened and subdued their judgment and taught them to like her and to treat her with the same amount of consideration they would have shown to a woman who had been brought up in their midst, and about whose past career all was clear, bright, and open as day. The only point on which they disagreed with her was (I thought at the time) an unimportant one. It was this—

“Mr. Wesley must come to her house when they married,” she said, “the one he occupied, though much larger, being not nearly so pleasant a residence, or picturesque an object in her opinion, as the High-Street House.”

I thought it a very minor matter, and told them all that I thought so, but I know Mr. Wesley felt that he derogated from his own dignity in acceding to the whim, and his sisters were "greatly hurt that John's wife should not think the house good enough for her in which their dear mother had lived and died." But eventually they forgave even this caprice of hers. And the day Vere Hope-Lee entered John Wesley's family as his wife, every member of the family was disposed to make the best of her.

The matter of the wedding tour had been one of much grave discussion in Bakenham.

Mr. Wesley's experience of foreign travel had been very limited, and he evidently thought that this would be a very fitting and proper occasion on which to display himself and his beautiful bride at the continental *table d'hôtes*. But she shrank with unfeigned distress from the prospect, and

was even more distressed, I thought, when he proposed London. She wanted "the country, quite the country," she declared. "Some village out of the tourist's tract, some place with the sea on one side, and the hills on the other, where they would be thrown entirely on each other's society for amusement, and where she could teach Mr. Wesley to rely entirely on her."

I saw that she had a motive in thus seeking to make herself absolutely essential to him, and believing it to be a good one, I favoured her views, and described to her a lovely little village in South Devon close on the borders of Dartmoor, with a tidal river running up into its woods, and with Plymouth seven miles off for its great head-centre of civilization.

"It's not a place that people go to much, is it?" Mrs. Wesley said to me, rather anxiously, just as they were starting, and I gave her honest assurances of its being a

most unfrequented place, though, at the same time, I marvelled at myself for taking the trouble to do so, as the desire for seclusion could be only a fad of hers, I thought.

Then they went away, and the Miss Wesleys and all Bakenham had time to "wonder" whether or not they were suited to one another.

From this point for some time I must relate what happened to Mrs. Wesley, from hearsay only, as I was not an eye-witness of what occurred.

They went down to the pretty balmy-aired village that lay in a valley in the heart of the hills, and found pleasant lodgings in the house of a widow lady, who, being a Wesleyan, worshipped her lodgers on account of their name with a worship that conduced very greatly to their comfort. And Mr. Wesley was satisfied at that which was so justly his due being meted out to him. And Vere bowed her graceful

neck uncomplainingly to the matrimonial yoke.

But one day just as the village and the village-life were becoming monotonous, their landlady told them of two exciting events which were coming off immediately. The one was the meeting of the "Fourborough" hounds at Ivy Bridge that day at eleven. The other was the opening of a new Wesleyan Chapel in the village, that night at seven, by a strange minister who had come from the North for the purpose.

"We'll go to the meet," Mrs. Wesley said, and her husband assented, adding—

"And to the opening of the Chapel in the evening."

Though I was not there I know that pretty Mrs. Wesley was a very conspicuously charming object at the meet that day. In brown velvet and brown fur she was "the prettiest bay out," as a young Diana of the neighbourhood observed to her cousin, and

her cousin being the master of the hounds, and an authority on most subjects that are discussed in the hunting-field, noised the young Diana's verdict abroad in a very short time.

A groom waiting there with a second horse for his master heard it, and led his charge a few paces nearer to the carriage in which the lovely lady sat, and Mrs. Wesley turning her pretty head round to get a better view of the handsome horse, found herself face to face with the groom and—did *not* cry out in consternation as she felt inclined to do.

But as for the groom ! his confusion for a moment or two made him an object of attention, as with a half-checked oath, and a jerk at the reins that nearly pulled the horse back on its haunches, he fell back a pace or two in seeming endeavour to escape her observation. The jerk roused the spirit of the horse, who kicked, plunged, and

finally broke loose, and went flaunting away over the field, and in the hurry and confusion that ensued Mrs. Wesley ordered her coachman to "drive home at once," hoping by thus doing to baffle curiosity and crush conjecture.

But one whom she had not hitherto taken into much account, nor upon whom had she bestowed much consideration, saw a little of the scene and thought much of it, and this was one whose curiosity could not be baffled, and whose conjectures were not easily crushed out, namely, her husband !

He waited till he was handing her out at the door of the lodgings, just as she was congratulating herself on his having "thought nothing of it," and breathing freely. Then he said—

" You look whiter than usual, Vere, what has frightened you into this unusual pallor ? "

" Frightened me ? "

"Yes, my dear; when that bold-faced groom came close to the carriage and stared at you I thought you were fainting, you grew so white; he seems to be an old acquaintance of yours, for I saw recognition of you flash into his eyes as they lighted on you."

"I don't know the man!" she said, coldly."

"But he knows you, and you have seen him before," Mr. Wesley persisted; and then Vere turned to him with a face pallid as a corpse, and teeth that were clenched in her effort to keep them from chattering.

"I tell you I don't know the man," she repeated, rigidly; "let that end it."

"But my dear! such emotion at sight of a groom, and such secrecy as to the cause of that emotion is alarming, and I *must* inquire further into it," he said weakly, and she led the way into the drawing-room and seated herself at the table before she answered

"I cannot understand the idea of
anybody's going to the city for
a long time, not even for
a week. I have never seen
anybody go there."

"You have never been there?"
"I have not been there."

"I am sure you do not trust me
enough to let me go there;
I am sure you can keep me
here, and I will not press me any
more."

"The man himself,
I am sure, for money, the
man will go."

"The man will go!" she said.

questions in his mind. Would it be well for him to stay away from Bakenham altogether, since he never again could hold his head up stiff-neckedly over his fellow-townspeople if aught of this affair leaked out? Or should he separate from her, and wend his way alone to some other place? No, this last was not to be thought of for a moment. The Wesleys had an established reputation in Bakenham, but he might die before he succeeded in building up such another elsewhere. Accordingly, he resolved to diplomatisise, and by way of beginning, said—

“Your ultimate good is more to be considered than any sensitive scrupulousness you may have about the revival of an unpleasant subject; still, if you can assure me convincingly that this is no sensational bigamy case, no vulgar love affair with a semi-legal link in it——”

“What!” she interrupted sharply.

“In a word, is that groom, that low-lived looking fellow, who glared at you with bulldog ferocity and affection, your lover, or your husband? I have read of such things in the depraved novels of the day.”

“You *will* have that question answered?”

“Yes, madam, or I shall distrust you.”

“Do I care whether you do distrust me or not, I wonder?” she said, meditatively; “do I care for the position you can keep me in; yes, I *do*, I believe; *don't* press me any more.”

“Then I'll find out from the man himself, he'll make a clean breast for money, the scoundrel——”

“Hush! he is my father!” she said.



CHAPTER III.

MRS. WESLEY'S STORY.

“**T**HIS is my father, and he is what he looks, bold and bad; but Mr. Wesley if I had to choose between evil befalling him, and evil befalling you, I should let you be the sufferer.”

She said this with a sort of patient weariness, a sad defiance that convinced him she was speaking the truth, and he felt frightened. Between such a pair, such a depraved father and such a desperate daughter who might work him any amount of bodily, mental, or social harm, at a moment's notice, he felt, unless he cut himself adrift from them, altogether helpless. But the desperate daughter was

legally bound to him, and the mere fact of her having for a father a man who was a groom and might be a villain, was not sufficient to loosen the bond. In the extremity of his fear and his sense of being unable to free himself from his dilemma, Mr. Wesley showed of what very mean materials he was made.

“Can’t we leave this place before he finds you out? I’ll make it worth the landlady’s while to keep our address a secret! It is the only thing to do to leave this place, to go without leaving a clue behind us.”

She laughed out mockingly.

“He would detect you under any disguise, and follow you to the ends of the earth if he thought it worth his while to do it,” she said, with an air of conviction that nearly paralysed Mr. Wesley. “But,” she added, “don’t alarm yourself, it is his object to avoid me—his interest not to cross my path; he is more afraid of me than I am of him, so you need not run away from him.”

"If it is safe to leave him at large," Mr. Wesley began, hesitatingly, but she interrupted him hotly—

"What do *you* know about him that could put him into custody? you must be content to let things take their course, and I can only help you by remaining quiet; let us go on here as if he were not near us; from my knowledge of him I should say he will be sure to get away from the neighbourhood without delay, now he knows that I am in it."

"But he's a servant, he must wait his master's pleasure," Mr. Wesley said, remindingly, and I think he had it in his mind when he said that it was a good and righteous thing to do, to hurt this woman who looked so infinitely his superior, by reminding her how infinitely beneath him she was. But she only smiled instead of looking humiliated by the reminder, and said—

“Poor father! I wonder if he thinks I play my part as well as he plays his!”

The new chapel was opened in the village at the appointed time that night, and Mr. and Mrs. Wesley were there, but he felt shorn of a good deal of his Wesleyan glory by the events of the day, and so made a modest appearance and refrained from putting himself forward in any way. The lights were not good in the chapel moreover, in consequence of the supply of oil at the village shop being rather low. Altogether he sat and felt in the shade, and no one noticed the ghastly change that came over his face when the “strange minister from the North” ascended the preaching rostrum and began to hold forth. No one, that is, save the lovely young wife who sat by his side, and who had learnt to read every change of expression on his face, from that teacher whose guiding instincts are un-

-erring contempt, which the reader has no desire to feel.

“So! you have a ‘something’ in your past which you recoil from now, and that smooth fat-faced man up there calling upon us to lay hold of salvation ‘as if it were a slippery something delighting to evade us, knows of it,” she thought looking at the arid, self-righteous aspect of the man by her side who called her his wife. “You shrink from him, as *I* shrank from my father to-day; which of us is the most to be blamed?—and so the most to be pitied, I wonder.”

It was this feeling, that if Mr. Wesley had sinned, he (like herself) was sorrowing for it deeply now, which made her voice more thrillingly gentle and tender than he had ever heard it before, as she leant forward and whispered—

“Mr. Wesley! you are not well, let us go out.”

“If we can quietly,” he muttered in reply,

and he rose up and made his way to the door of the chapel, she following him.

“Who are these backsliders? who are these that put their hands to the plough and then turn back?” the preacher cried, as he watched their receding figures, and something of the fascination which a hated and feared object sometimes exercises, must have been upon Mr. Wesley, for he turned, and let the oil lamps reveal him to the minister. And the latter closed his exhortation abruptly.

They had dined, and she had left Mr. Wesley and gone back to the uninteresting drawing-room, in which there was not a single object to distract her thoughts from the disagreeable and perplexing incidents of the day, when there came a loud ring at the front door bell, and she heard the same voice that had been raised aloud in prayer and praise in the chapel, inquiring for Mr. Wesley, and her heart stood still for a few

moments as she strained her ears to catch the faintest echo of what followed.

It must be borne in mind that though she had married Mr. Wesley solely for the purpose of advancing herself socially, and of generally compassing her own ends, she had an acquired respect for him that was genuine and strong. It seemed to her incredible that he could ever have done anything which could not well bear the light of day. And so when she saw him cower at sight of one who appeared very insignificant to her, it was but natural that her fears should be greatly aroused on behalf of the man through whom she held her position.

It was a long, long interview between Mr. Wesley and his uninvited guest, and during the continuance of it Mrs. Wesley was a prey to keen and natural curiosity. But she came to the resolution that as she had refused to lay bare her former life to her husband, she would abstain from ques-

tioning him on the subject of the visitor or the motive of the visit.

Presently, however, her strength to keep this resolution was very sorely tried, for on the departure of his guest, Mr. Wesley came into the room, and, without looking at her, said—

“Can you pack up and leave this place to-night?”

“Is there any reason why I should do it?” she asked; and he answered impatiently—

“There is a reason why I should do it, but if you prefer it you can remain and follow me in the morning; I have no time to lose, the carriage will be at the door in a few minutes, and I have a five-mile drive to catch the midnight train.”

Saying this he went away out of the room and upstairs hurriedly, leaving her to come to her decision as to whether she would go with him or not.

She stood lost in amazement and perplexity for a time, till the sound of the carriage coming up to the door recalled her to herself. Then she resolved suddenly, and ran upstairs, saying—

“I can manage to go with you, Mr. Wesley ; my maid can remain behind and pack.”

“Too late !” he said, almost roughly pushing past her. “I must be off without delay, follow me to-morrow.”

He was out of the room rapidly descending the stairs, almost running away it seemed to her, and she had to hasten after him to say—

“Where am I to join you, you have not told me where ?”

“You’ll find the address there,” he said, throwing back a sealed envelope, and by the time she had opened it he had driven off.

The envelope contained a slip of paper on which was written in pencil—

“You had better not go back to Backenham, if you do you will find yourself coldly received, for I shall write to my sisters telling them that I have been obliged to leave you; as I shall assign no cause for this, they will naturally think you are to blame. Take my advice, go to a new place, and under a new name begin a new life. You have seen the last of me.—JOHN WESLEY.”

Though she had no love for the man she had married, it was a very staggering blow to her that he should have left her voluntarily.

For a time she was too much stunned to make any plan, or come to any determination as to what it would be well to do. But at length she recovered her judgment, and resolved to keep up appearances. More than this! She resolved to go back to Bakenham, and so deport herself that his sisters even should come at last to hold her blameless.

So she came back sadder-looking than I liked to see her, but infinitely prettier and softer than before. And when she had told me all the story, I applauded her for her courage, and promised that she should be believed, and not treated as one who had erred.

But I promised more than I was able to perform, in spite of my social influence in Bakenham. The Miss Wesleys were inexorable, and nothing would convince them that their unfortunate sister-in-law was not one of the vilest of sinners. I think I came to love her, poor thing, more than I had ever done before, when I saw how gently and tolerantly she treated their harsh injustice.

“It is but human that they should think me—the stranger—to blame, rather than that they should surmise evil of the brother whom they had known all their lives,” she said, when she found that the Miss Wesleys

ordained that their brother's wife was to live under the ban of suspicion till such time as he should elect to return and remove it from her.

“And your sole offence consists in having an unpresentable father, and of that fact they are ignorant. I wonder you have patience to keep quiet; why don't you go and insist upon their hearing about the strange minister, the effect he produced on your husband, and his nocturnal visit; let them understand that if there is sin and mystery it is on his side, not on yours.”

“They wouldn't believe me.”

“You could call witnesses—the people in the chapel, your landlady, your servants.”

She shook her head.

“People in the chapel wouldn't notice an extra shade of pallor and trembling lips; the landlady didn't see the man who called that night, and the Miss Wesleys would

vow that the servants were my creatures ; no, all I can do is to wait the issue."

"And live suspected," I said.

"And live suspected ; just so. Mrs. Pendergast, *you* must suspect something wrong about me in your heart ; I have told you who and what my father is, and yet you see me surrounded by the evidences of wealth and refinement, in your heart the incongruity must make you distrust me."

"The incongruity is very astounding, but I believe in your honour and honesty," I replied ; and then in her graceful, spasmodic way she sprang up, and came and clasped my hands, and said she would tell me "all her story."

So feeling that if I knew it all, I might aid this forlorn young creature better, I bade her act on the good impulse without delay, and tell me all about it immediately.

"My father was a groom in Lord Denbigh's stables, and my mother and he

lived in one of the lodges at the park gates, when I can first remember," she began.

"I was a wonderfully taking child, I believe; at any rate, all the visitors used to praise and admire me when I ran out by mother's side to open the gates, and when I was about twelve, one gentleman who was staying at the Hall offered my father fifty pounds if he would let me go up to London to study for the stage. The gentleman was a famous actor, and the lessee of a theatre as well, and he vowed that he saw a bright career in the future for me if I only studied hard.

"Well, I played small parts in the provinces till I was about sixteen, and then the same gentleman gave me an engagement at his theatre, and I came out as Juliet. I was only moderately successful, but he persevered, and in a fortnight my impersonation of the passionate love-stricken Italian girl was utterly different to what it had

been on the night of my *début*. It really was rather fine, and I was the success of the day, and I was very happy and very much elated as you may imagine.

“ The first thing I did when I had a salary was to hire lodgings and get my father and mother up to live with me. Father wouldn't work when he found I made enough to keep us all, and in his idleness he took to drink, and one night he raised his hand against my mother. Oh ! Mrs. Pendergast, this is the awful part of my story. I say he raised his hand against my mother, but I didn't see him do it. When I came home from the theatre one night, I found poor mother lying insensible on the floor, and father crouching over her and crying in his drunken fright. She never recovered ; and there was an inquest, and her head was fractured, and there was blood on the poker, I knew. But I washed the blood off before any one saw it that dreadful night.

and saved my father's life at the cost of my conscience.

"It was brought in that she died from the effects of a fall, and he swore that when he came in that night he had found her on the floor. But *I* knew better, and he guessed that I knew it, and could never look me in the face after that fatal night. So after mother's funeral he said it was better we should part, and he went back to service, and I worked on at the theatre, and in a few years made a good name and a good income.

"Then a gentleman called Vaughan wanted to marry me, and I grew very fond of him and very proud of him. I agreed to leave the stage, for his 'family wouldn't receive an actress,' he told me. They were ghastly, stuck-up people, Mrs. Pendergast, but at the time I thought it all right that they should be so, because I loved him dearly, you see. They called on me and made much of me, and there was never to

be a whisper about the stage. Our wedding-day was fixed, and then what I had been dreading all the time came to pass. He began to inquire about my family.

“ I was a fool to have relied on his vows of fidelity and changeless affection under all circumstances ; a confiding fool, but my love for him and trust in him were absolute, and I told him the truth, all of it.

“ I think that he would have clung to me through it all, that he would have got over my father being a groom, but he couldn't get over the fact that I suspected he was a murderer as well. It nearly broke his heart, I am sure, but he said at once that we must part, that he could not make me his wife. He wanted to settle a handsome fortune on me then, but I had too much self-respect to take it. It was the man himself I had wanted, not the money.

“ That the separation hurt him as horribly as it did me was soon proved. He died a

broken-hearted, disappointed man, a few months afterwards, and left me nearly all he possessed. Then, out of respect for him, I left the stage, and dropped my stage name, and travelled for several years, improving and educating myself, and when I was tired of travel I came to Bakenham, determining to marry some man who could put me in a good safe position. Mr. Wesley did as well as another, I thought, for I could never *love* any one again. And now you know all about me, and can understand why the sight of my father is so agonising to me, and why the sight of me is so terrible to him. I live in dread of the day coming when remorse shall seize him, and he will give himself up, and denounce himself as the murderer of his wife. I send him money, and I have tried to get him to go to America, but he only drinks the harder the more money he has, and clings to stable-life and low companions. Now, you see that

I have a heavier burden to bear than this extra one which Mr. Wesley has laid upon me?"

"My poor little heroine," I exclaimed, as she brought her story to a close, "things are very dark about you now, but it's always darkest before dawn, remember."

END OF VOL. I.



7

